Dancing Snail

Translated by Clare Richards

I'M NOT LAZY, I'M ON ENERGY SAVING MODE

The Korean Non-Fiction Bestseller

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CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

PART 01 I Don’t Know Why I’m Like This

01 If Only I Was Crease-free, Too . . .
02 They Don’t Even Know Me
03 So What Am I Supposed to Do?
04 Maybe I’m Doomed to Be Unhappy
05 Since When Does Anything in Life Ever Go to Plan?
06 A Child Lost in Space
07 I Don’t Want to Stand Out By Myself
08 Will You Log Me Out of Everything?
09 Will I Only Be Loved Once I’m Perfect?
10 I Envy People Who Make It Look Easy

My Little Tips for Recharging an Empty Heart

When I Want to Live Recklessly, But Don’t Have the Courage
When Negative Emotion Bubbles Over
When I Seem to Be the Only One Treading Water

PART 02 A Boring Day Adulting

11 What Does It Mean to Be an Adult? 1
12 What Does It Mean to Be an Adult? 2
13 Though I’m Crying on the Inside Again Today
14 You Think Honesty’s Attractive?
15 I Spent the Whole Day Being Self-conscious Again
16 What Am I Crying for?
17 I’ve Had Enough of Being Bad
18 Dreams of Moving Out
19 Why Can’t You Say No?
20 I Stepped in Shit Again Today
21 Do Relationships Have an Expiry Date, Too?
22 It’s Too Late to Start Now
23 The Laws of Nature

My Little Tips for Recharging an Empty Heart

When My Empty Bank Account Has Me Sighing
When It Feels Like the Whole Universe Is Against Me

Spacing Out on the Hell Commute

PART 03 I Want to Stay at Home Every Day

24 Sometimes I Don’t Feel Like Doing Anything
25 The Paradox of Overcoming Depression
26 A Night Spent Scrolling Through My Contacts
27 I Feel Alone Even When I’m Not
28 Is It Okay to Live Like This?
29 Someone Who Needs a Little More Time
30 When We’re Sick and Tired of Situations We Can’t Control
31 People Drain My Energy
32 Homebody Skill: Max Level
33 Does Hard Work Put Food on the Table?

My Little Tips for Recharging an Empty Heart

Sleepless Nights Spent Worrying About What Might Never Happen
When Self-confidence Hits Rock Bottom
When I’m Harassed by Spiralling Thoughts

PART 04 It’s Extremely Normal to Not Want to

34 When the Busyness Stops, I Feel Empty
35 What If I Make the Wrong Choice?
36 Do I Always Have to Think Positively?
37 I Hate Being Me
38 Wow, the Cup Is Half Empty!
39 No Matter How Hard I Try, I Can’t See the End
40 I Just Want to Give Up on It All
41 Sick and Tired of Life
42 I Know the Happy Moments Don’t Last

My Little Tips for Recharging an Empty Heart

The Fatter My Pockets Get, the Poorer My Heart Becomes
When I Put Myself Down for Wanting to Lounge Around All Day
When I’m Doing Nothing, But My Mind Is Uneasy

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PROLOGUE

During one of the darker periods of my life, when my mood and energy levels were particularly low, I struggled to even read a single line of a book. I wanted to create content that would be easily accessible for people going through hard times like me, and so I began keeping a picture diary. I would add a few lines as captions to my illustrations, and though my work was far from perfect, people were encouraged by what I'd written; this in turn encouraged me, and I decided to pull together what I'd created into a book.

This book is a record of the three to four years during my mid-to late-twenties when I was at my lowest. As I wrote, I was still in the process of healing, and still had bad days. Though I'd spent years striving to change my thought patterns, every once in a while my heart would plummet to thirty floors below ground.

During these times, when my life had been thrown off-balance, it pained me to read comments on my social media from people thanking me and saying how much I'd encouraged them. Ever since I'd begun to post my illustrated story – about my difficulties with lassitude and about my journey to recovery – I'd felt a responsibility. The thought that people might look at me and hope that they, too, could get better: this pressured me to keep smiling, and my heart grew heavy. As burden piled on top of responsibility, I felt a familiar burning emotion weighing down on me.

In the meantime, I was making breakthroughs. Lately, the periods of low energy I'd been experiencing had been oddly short. Even when I felt like wallowing in my emotions, as I had in the past, the desire soon vanished. Over time, there was less area in my body for

the lassitude parasite to latch on to. Feelings of lassitude cling on to their hosts and grow in size; and so, the less lassitude I felt, the less harm that new lassitude could cause. By the time I'd finished writing this book, I could notice the black marks on my heart peeling away. Slowly, but steadily.

Though life is still tough for me, the fact that I was able write this book – with lofty aims that someone like me might encourage someone else – was thanks to the encouragement I received from others, whether that was through counselling or coaching, podcasts or books. I was determined to give something back. I'm not an expert myself, I hope the stories of what I've learnt from real experts, such as my counsellor, will help those going through similar hard times.

Lack of energy is a response to stress and is not a disease. You must believe that you will get better.

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PART 01

I DON'T KNOW WHY I'M LIKE THIS

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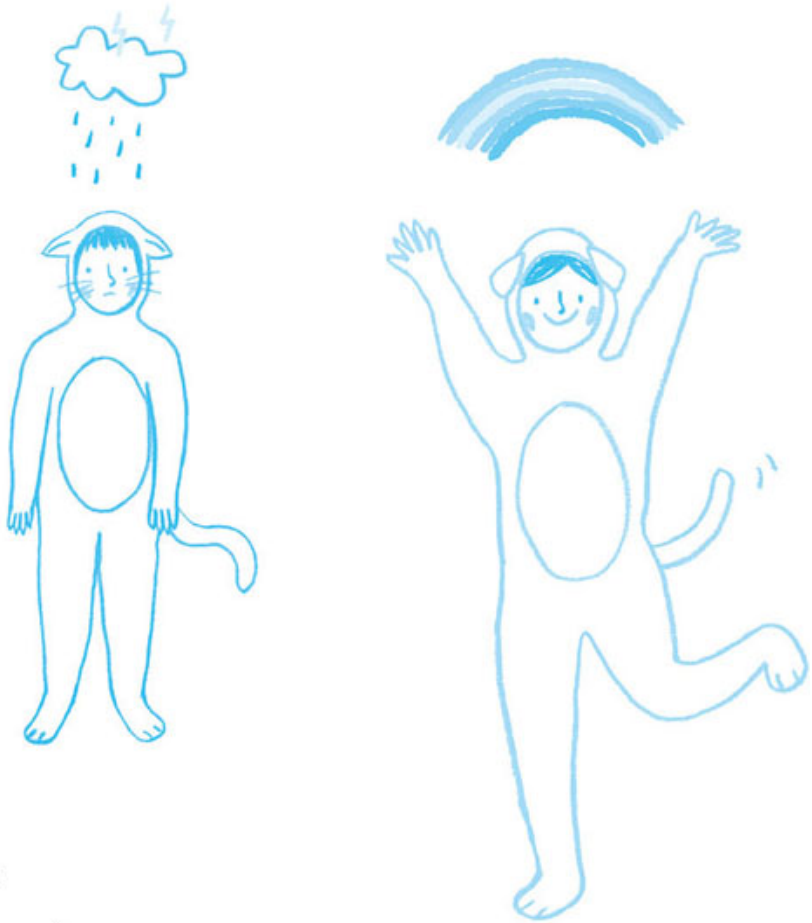
01
If Only I Was Crease-free, Too . . .

As a child, I rarely smiled.

I practised smiling in the mirror, and that helped me make one or two friends.

But because I wasn't a cheerful person,



I always envied the
cheerful innocence of
my friends.

I wanted to be crease-free, too.

Some days it feels
like there are still black
marks on my heart.

Sometimes I'm afraid that
if I let the marks show, I'll
scare people away.

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THE BLACK MARKS ON MY HEART

Until recently, I couldn't see beauty in flowers and trees. I'd never been an animal person, either, and so I couldn't relate when people would coo over an adorable cat or dog. Afraid people would think I had a heart of stone, I would raise my voice an octave and perform my best possible reaction: 'WOW, what a cutie! She's so pretty!'

At some point, I started to recognise that I was a little different, but I'd always been that way and so simply brushed it under the rug. I wore protective armour – my smile – and busied myself trying to fit in. Behind my happy face, I could hide any 'unnecessary' emotions, and I liked that as long as I was smiling, no one asked about what I lacked. But that only made me weirder – perhaps I'd lost the ability to perform appropriate emotional responses. In serious situations, I would be the only one to erupt into a big grin – which made things awkward to say the least – and I would respond similarly when a situation called for anger, too.

If we've had bad experiences when expressing negative emotions, we can become scared of opening up. And so we make value judgements before we allow ourselves to feel. Negative emotions are bad and so must be hidden; positive emotions are good and that's all we should let show. Bottled-up feelings stagnate and fester, and even block the path to experiencing positive emotion.

It isn't easy to share the black marks on our hearts with other people. Some might take advantage, and others might take offence if they're not ready to hear what we have to say.

If I could embrace my creases, perhaps I could talk about the beauty in the world without forcing a smile?

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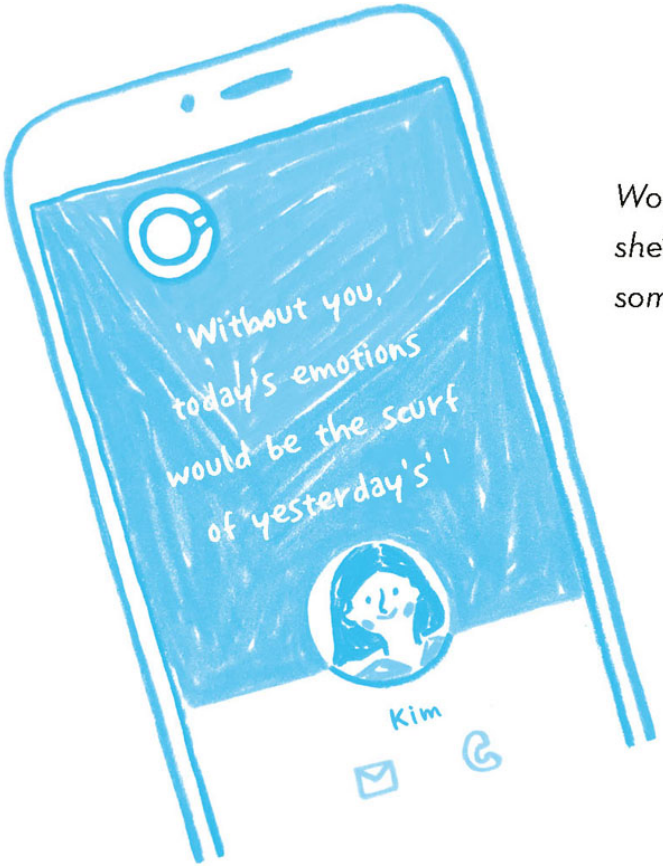
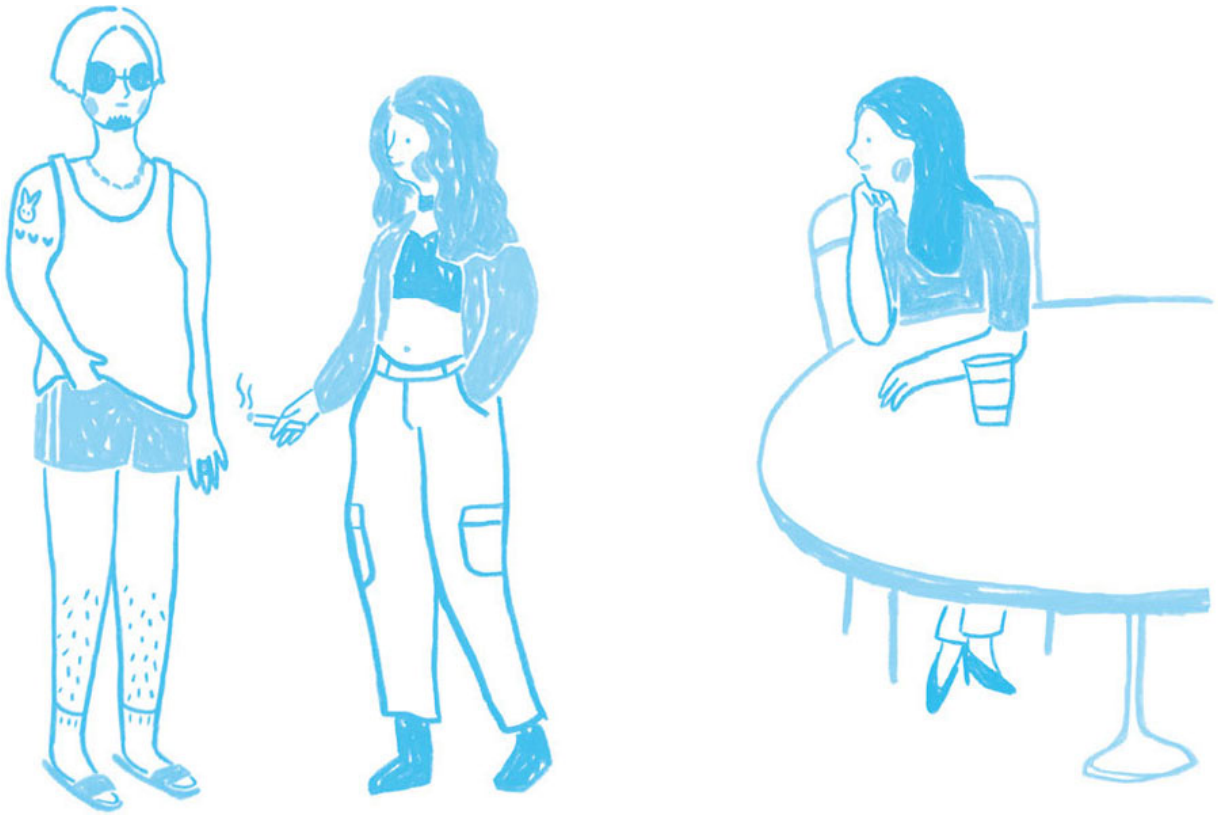
02
They Don’t Even Know Me

Several times a day, I judge people.
Like when I look at their profile pictures and status messages.



Wonder if she’s dating someone?

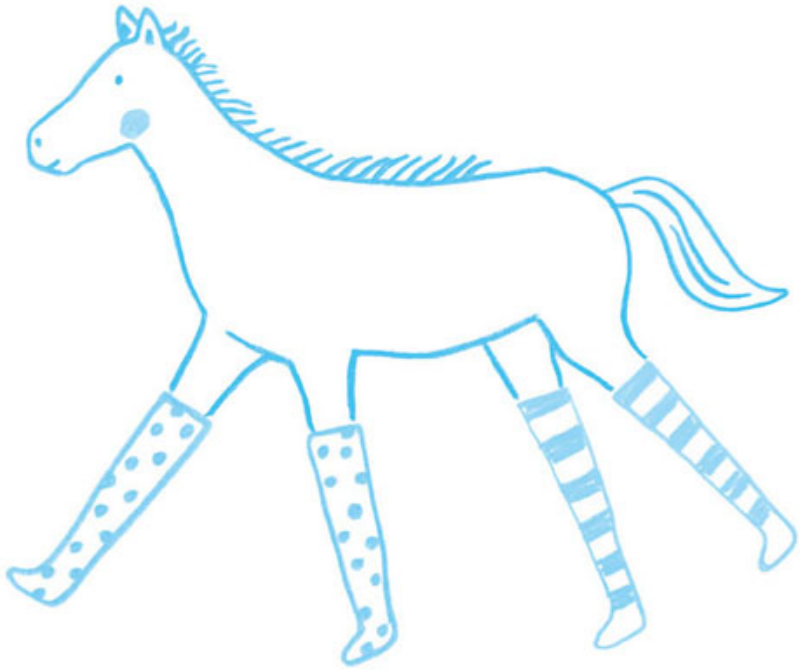
I observe their facial expressions and how they dress.



With a single glance, I think I know everything about them.

But I don't want to be judged, either.

They don't even know me.



Never judge a book by its cover.

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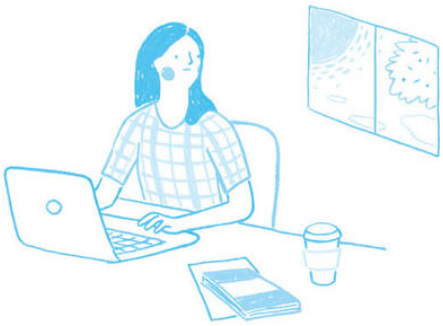
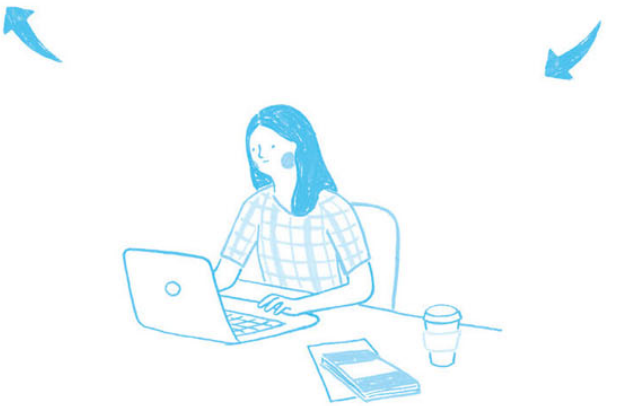
03
So What Am I Supposed to Do?

I'm busy, but I'm bored.

The weather's nice outside.





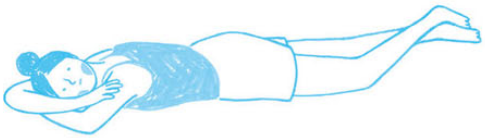
I want to go out and enjoy it.

When I have time, there's nowhere to go.

I want to go out, but I want to
stay at home.

I have plans.

I'm bored of just
staying at home.



I want to go home.

1 *Amélie* (2001). Directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet. France: UGC-Fox Distribution

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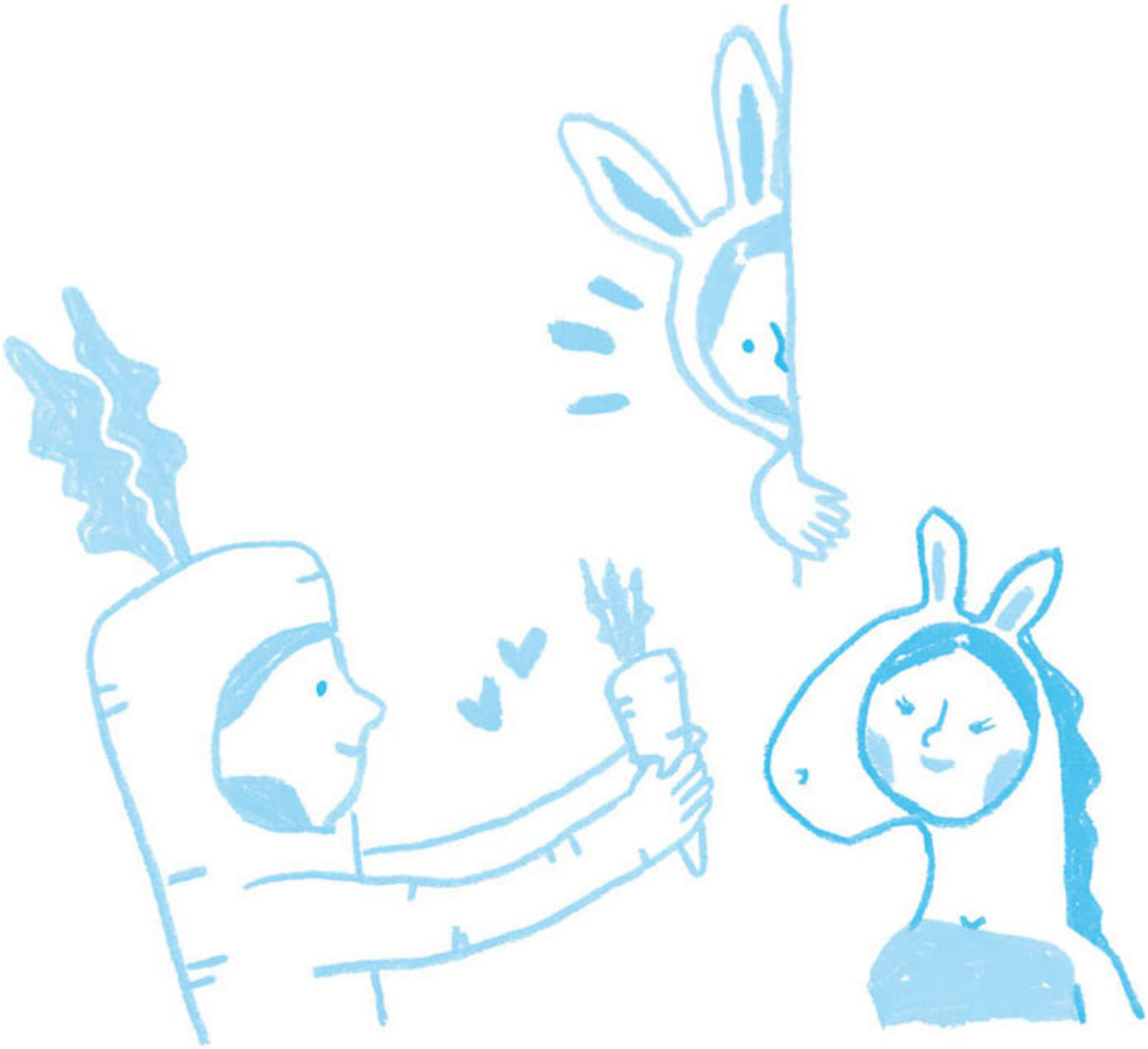
04
Maybe I’m Doomed to Be Unhappy

Once upon a time, there was a rabbit who’d been depressed for a long, long while.

One day, the depressed rabbit found happiness, but for some reason, she became extremely uneasy.



When misfortune came her way once more, the sadness made the rabbit feel secure.

Believing that certain unhappiness was better than uncertain happiness, the depressed rabbit drifted off to sleep.

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CERTAIN UNHAPPINESS IS BETTER THAN UNCERTAIN HAPPINESS

At some point in life, I started to label random misfortune as 'fate', and everything became simpler. Once I'd hidden behind the veil of destiny, there was no longer a need to dream of happiness, or to take action to improve my situation – it was so easy. Now that I'd tasted the sweetness of pessimism, I put my all into weaving together every unfortunate incident I encountered into a convincing belief system.

'Just look. I knew this would happen again. Guess I'm destined to live like this.'

Happiness felt unfamiliar, like wearing someone else's clothes, and I turned away from it. When I should have been relishing that happiness, I instead focused all my attention on the fact that it could disappear at any moment. Being unhappy made me incredibly sensitive: when something bad really did happen, the event imprinted itself on my mind, alongside a heightened emotional response. In this way, over time, emotional memories can become weighted to one side — we become used to unhappiness, and our thinking becomes rigid. These thought patterns easily transform into beliefs, and these beliefs in turn become reality.

In the film *The Brand New Testament*, God is none other than the middle-aged dad next door. A clever examination of the human experience, the film features an amusing illustration of Murphy's Law. When God created the world, he made a few 'Laws of Universal Pain-in-the-assness', including the following:

Law 2125: A slice of bread always falls jam side down, otherwise the jam is on the wrong side. Law 2129: Whenever I get in the bathtub, the phone rings.
Law 2218: The next line always moves faster. Law 2231: Pains in the ass never come one at a time.

We believe that pessimism is a ‘choice’, but this is rarely true. Pessimism feeds off the fear that spreads through a heart wounded by past disappointment and hurt. Yet, even if this same heart keeps us stuck in a rut, we shouldn’t be too hard on ourselves. Some people take longer than others to rebuild their strength.

If we worry and make a fuss in front of a child who’s had a fall, the child will immediately burst into tears, but if we smile and shrug it off, the child will follow suit. In the same way, the stronger our responses to unhappy events, the easier it is for these responses to become entrenched. We mustn’t fall into the trap of letting irrational thoughts control us. Instead, we should allow ourselves to fully experience the gentle moments of happiness that come by every now and then.

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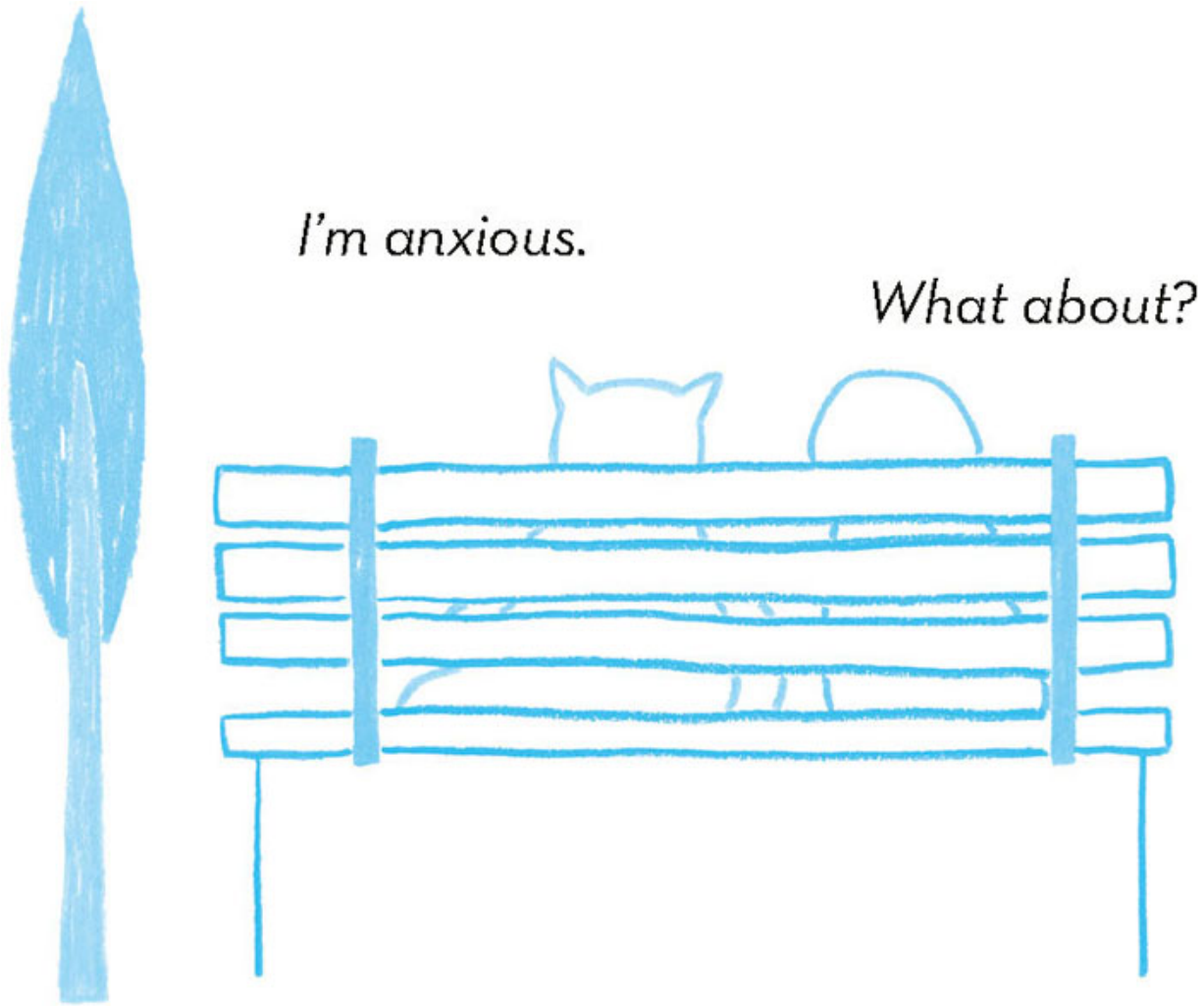
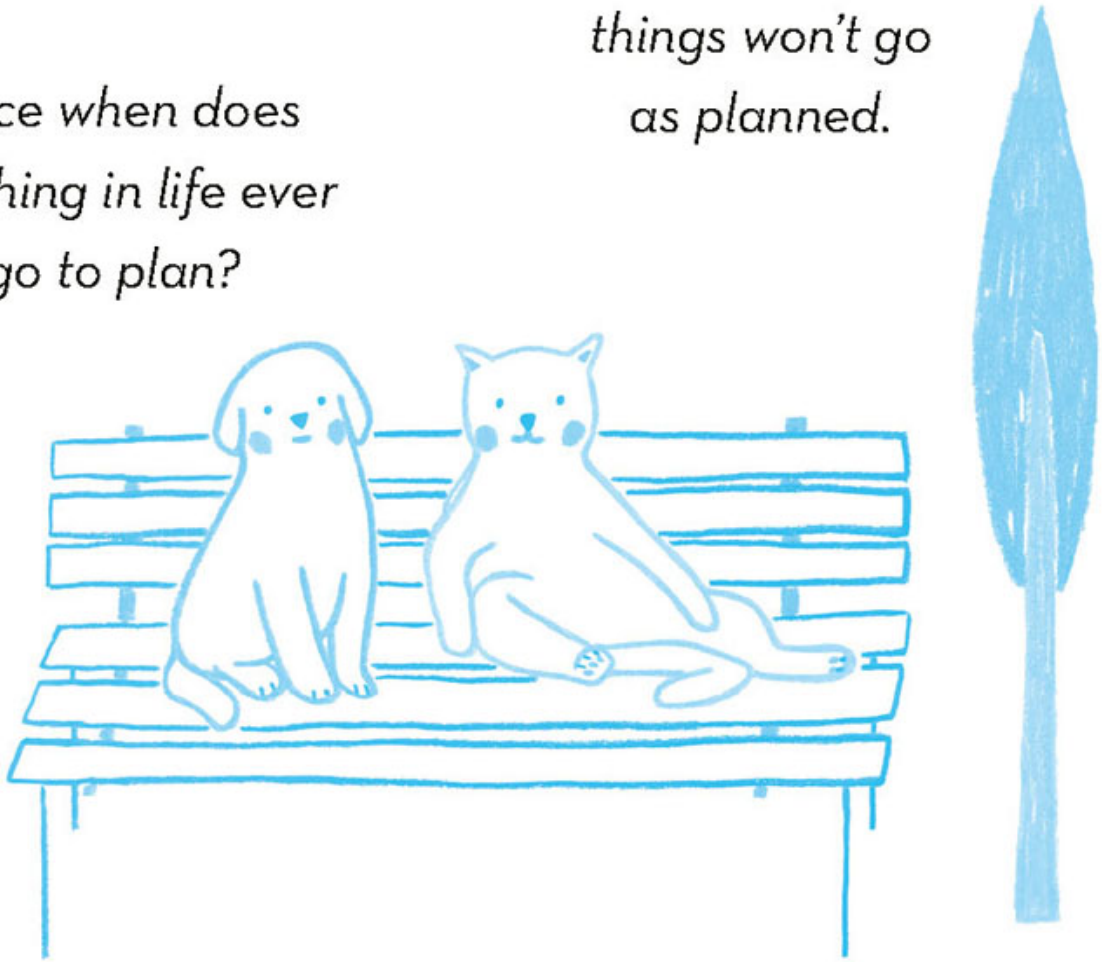
05
Since When Does Anything in Life Ever Go to Plan?



I'm worried things won't go as planned.

Since when does anything in life ever go to plan?



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SOMETIMES WE DON’T KNOW THE ANSWER

I have a few strange eating habits. When I open a tube of Pringles, the intact crisps are usually at the top, and the further down I go, the more broken ones I find. First, I pour them all out onto a tray and sort the intact ones from the broken ones. Next, I carefully place the intact crisps back inside the tube, then I pick up the broken pieces and eat them first. Once I’ve dealt with all the fragments, I scoop up the perfectly round crisps one by one – that feeling is amazing. I approach my favourite fruit, grapes, with the same mindset. I gently lift up the grapes still firmly attached to the branch, then gather together the fallen ones, and place them on a nice plate – once I’ve eaten all the fallen ones first, I feel at peace. Naturally, I can’t do things like this in public, which grates on me.

Another one of my obsessive tendencies is that I only feel comfortable once my phone battery reaches 100%. Even if I need to be somewhere, I can’t leave my flat until that number hits 100 (ironically, I’m not obsessive about being on time). Not 97%, not 98% – only 100% will do. Unless in exceptional circumstances, I rarely let the battery run low, and I just don’t get people who say on a call, ‘Hang on, sorry. My phone’s about to die. I’m at 3%!’ *Come on now, have you forgotten about the existence of portable power banks?*

This personality trait comes in handy when things need to get done according to plan – as we all know, however, in life things rarely go how we want. In particular, when something happens in one of my relationships that is out of my control, I stay up all night fretting. No matter how prepared we are for how other people might respond, plans inevitably veer off course. Although, if this trait doesn’t negatively impact other things, there’s no need to try and

change ourselves. Obsessive tendencies that don't get in the way of everyday life, and that provide a sense of stability, can be left as they are. In my case, however, my work and relationships were becoming more and more affected, so I needed to make a few adjustments.

First of all, I started doing the opposite of what my ordinary compulsions urged me to. I ate the intact crisps first. Initially, it felt a bit icky, but in the end, enjoying the intact parts without having to deal with the broken pieces wasn't all that bad. Then, except for when I had to make an important call for work, I let my phone battery run down. I also noticed how exhausting it was to always rush to check my notifications within a microsecond, and set most of my apps not to display notifications on the lock screen – through this, I became less sensitive to external stimuli. A 3% battery no longer made me horribly anxious. Though these things might seem insignificant, they follow the same principles as cognitive behavioural therapy (by changing our thoughts, CBT helps to manage difficult emotions, and is now recognised as the most effective non-pharmaceutical treatment for the majority of psychiatric illnesses).

Given my obsessive tendencies, I get tired more easily than others, and so I also made use of my planner personality type to schedule rest time in advance. This way, I gave myself room to breathe in my daily routine, which in turn gave me more bandwidth when it came to other things, and I could feel that I was looking at both myself and the world with more kindness. The little changes I'd made had a genuine impact on my thoughts and emotions.

The only constant in life is change. Just because one thing doesn't go according to plan, it's not the end of the world. Even if we don't know the right answer, sometimes it's okay to just give something a go.

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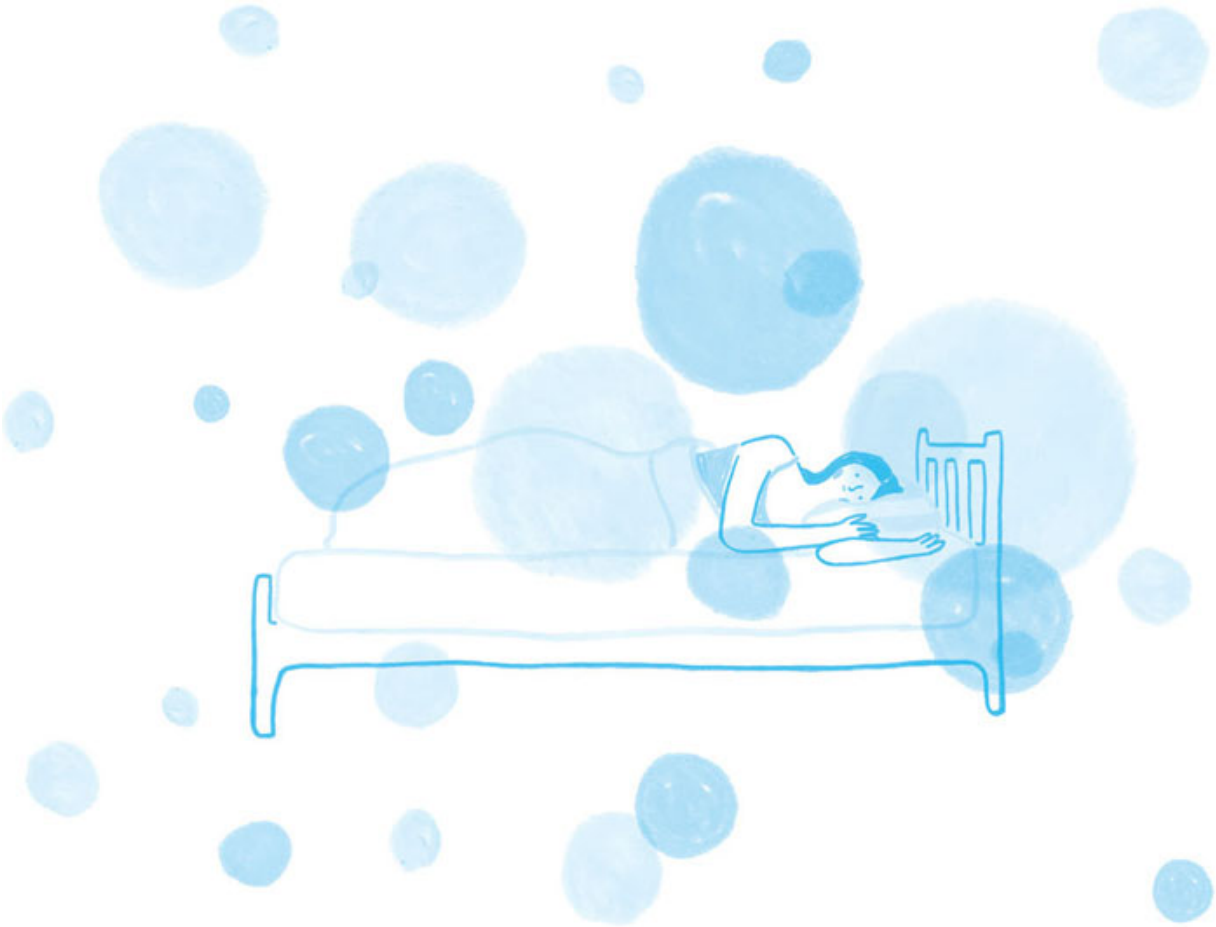
06
A Child Lost in Space

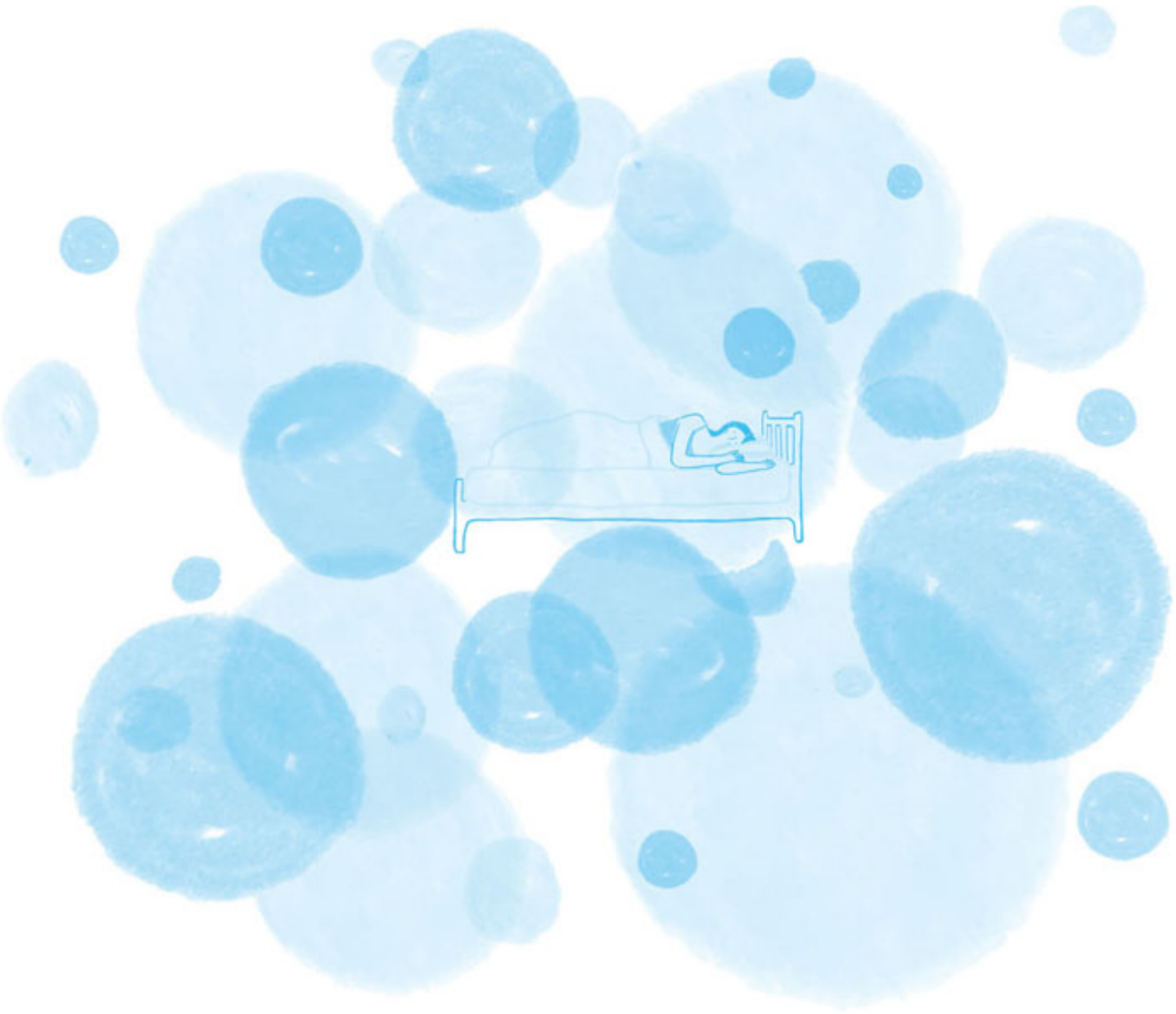
The silence before I fall asleep is the longest time of the day.

Lying in bed, I ruminate over the day’s events.

Regret and anxiety about the most insignificant things



wash over me



and swallow me whole.

I thought that when I grew up, I'd be less afraid of the dark.

But when I'm lying alone in bed at night, I sometimes feel like a child lost in space.

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IN LIFE, THINGS HAPPEN

Let me tell you a little trick I have for making life much harder. When I come back home after meeting someone new or spending time with someone I don't get along with, I replay our conversations over and over in my head. After messaging with someone I find difficult, that night in bed I'll re-read the conversation from start to finish and ruminate on the parts where I might have slipped up. I think to myself: *What did I go and say that for?* or *I know what I should've said then.* I dwell on where I went wrong and even grow concerned for the future. What if I made the same mistake again . . . ?

For those who study English by watching American TV shows, it is said that the most effective method is to memorise and repeat the dialogue while mimicking the characters' gestures, facial expressions, and emotions. In my case, I've invented my own study technique to etch uncomfortable situations into my memory. I store past situations and conversations and how they made me feel meticulously in my frontal lobe – it's no surprise that I remember them vividly. Given how hard I've been studying, I'll never forget them. If only I'd put that much energy into exam revision at school . . .

If we don't want to hold on to an uncomfortable memory, then we should do the exact opposite. When you're in the heat of emotion, clear your head and take a break, and once your mind has returned to a rational state, that's when it's time to pick up past memories. In this way, we're less likely to store warped emotions or to allow anxiety to evolve into excessive worry. What's most important to know is that, even if you're an overthinker like me, this doesn't mean

you’re ‘weird’. If we accept ourselves and our secret methods for making life harder – whatever they may be – we realise that nothing is that much of a big deal as we thought.

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07
I Don’t Want to Stand Out By Myself

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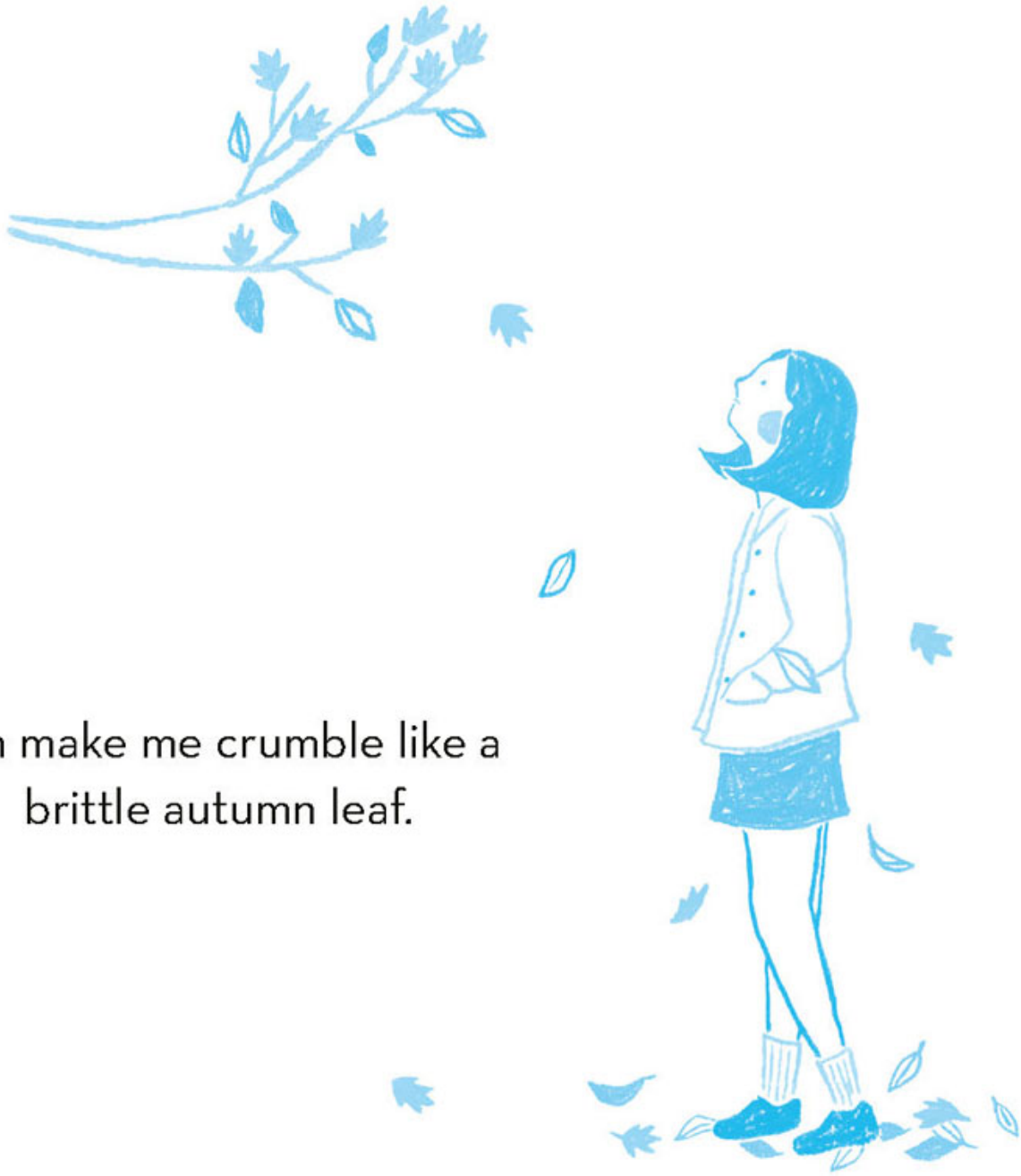
08
Will You Log Me Out of Everything?

or a single
loaded glance



can make me crumble like a
brittle autumn leaf.

On days like these,
when my heart shrinks,

I want to be alone.

Will you log me out of everything?

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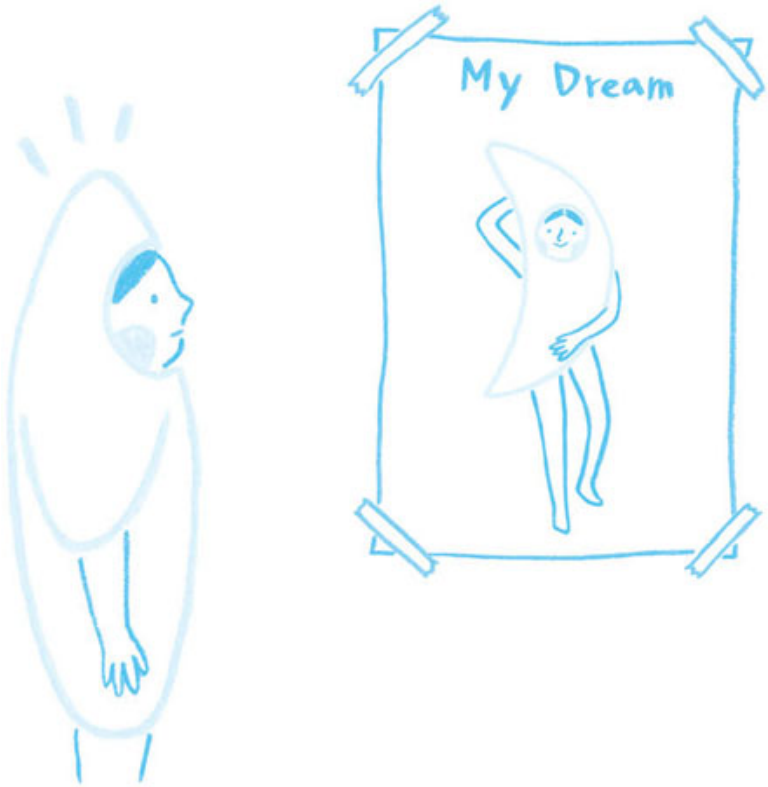
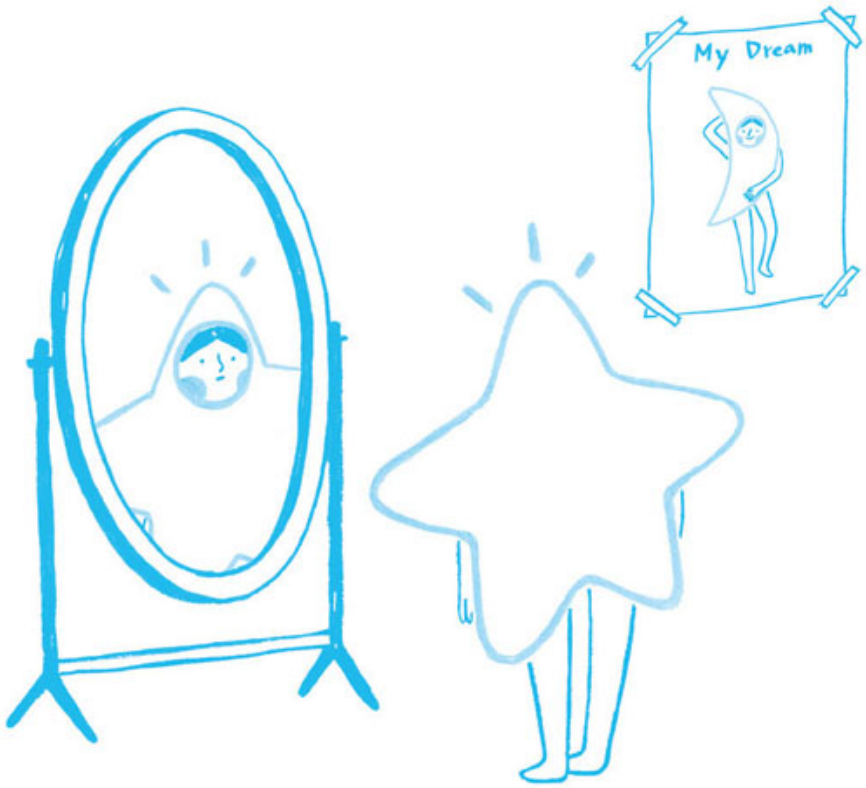
09
Will I Only Be Loved Once I'm Perfect?



There's one thing that perfectionists need to be extra careful of.

When we try
to work on



our imperfections,

we mustn't lose sight of the worth
we already have.

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IT'S OKAY TO JUST 'BE'

One day, I attended a lecture at a psychological research institute, and perhaps I missed what the speaker was getting at, but I came back shaken, feeling that I wasn't enough. After hiding under the bedcovers and sobbing for a while, I sent a message to the lecturer asking for help. I asked them to recommend some talks to listen to, to help me grow as a person. Their reply read: 'I'd like you to reassess the idea that, since you're not perfect, you need to improve. As long as you think like that, any new knowledge will act as a weapon to harm you.' For a while afterwards, I stopped trying to do anything about my personality or my psychological problems, and stopped seeking out advice and words of encouragement. Looking back now, I think this time helped me free up some bandwidth.

Perfectionists always focus on imperfections, believing there is a need to improve – this is true both when it comes to themselves and other people. This doesn't mean that a perfectionist personality in and of itself is bad or problematic. What could be wrong about being conscious of our flaws and trying to do better? However, we have to be able to distinguish between perfection and value. The belief that we'll only be worthy of love and acceptance once we are perfect is a slippery slope. If we see our imperfect selves as less worthy, then when we experience injustice, we end up believing we *deserve* such treatment. Let's not conflate imperfection with a lack of worth. Imperfection has nothing to do with our basic rights.

Even so, whenever I set myself a goal to improve, I secretly anticipated the acceptance and attention I'd receive once I'd achieved it. But was there anything wrong with feeling like that? Was it a sign of low self-steem? To accept myself as worthy as I am, do I

have to stop striving to improve myself? Not at all. We all aspire to receive the acceptance and attention of others, and use this as motivation. There's nothing bad about that. However, we must not fall into the trap of believing that our hard work and achievements determine our worth. This becomes a vicious circle: the harder we work to realise something, the lower our self-worth becomes.

Changing a perfectionist personality is no mean feat. Instead, we should embrace our personalities while acknowledging that even if we're not perfect, and even if we don't better ourselves, we are still worthy. Let's find peace in the knowledge that today, too, it's okay to just 'be'.

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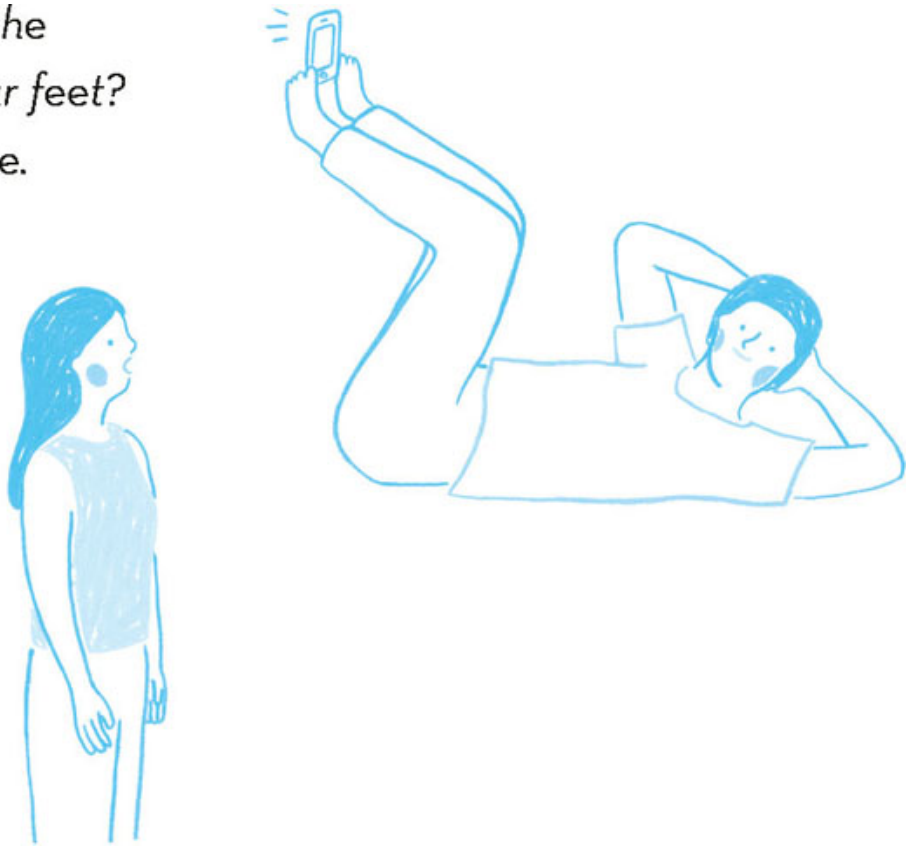
10
I Envy People Who Make It Look Easy

I’m jealous of people who make it look easy.

People who eat whatever they want and don't put on weight.

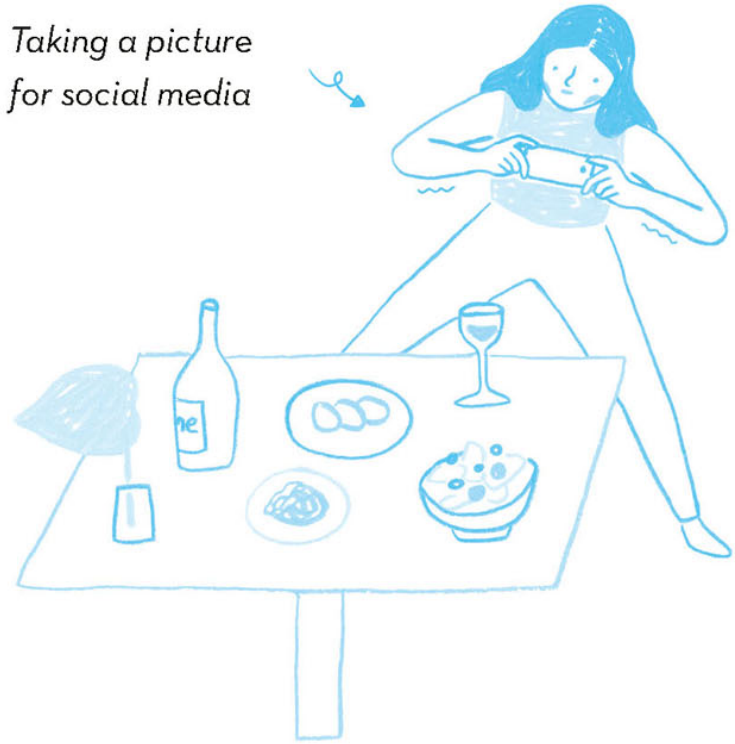
Wow, you took the picture with your feet? That's impressive.



Who can pull anything off with minimal effort.

People who are just talented.

Maybe because I'm always trying



and trying some more.

I most envy those who are naturally good at whatever they do.

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MAYBE SHE'S NOT BORN WITH IT

There were times when I'd lament all the things I wasn't born with. I'm not a genius, and I'm not naturally drop-dead gorgeous. And neither am I innately sweet or sociable. No matter where I was, I compared what I didn't have to what others were born with, and I was always left feeling that I'd never be satisfied. I feared that my life would always be second-or third-rate. If only I could've been the best at *something* . . . The world was forever making me feel like I was nothing special. Each time, I would fall into a slump, and it took ages before I could get back up again.

Funnily enough, though I knew how to lament the things I didn't have, I didn't know how to truly accept them. No, I didn't *want* to. I wasn't interested in anything as concrete as advice about where I was lacking. I simply held on to my obstinate desire to be as good as those with innate talent, and spent my time treading water. It was only once I accepted that I wasn't born with these things, and that this was okay, that I started to feel a little satisfaction in what I *could* do.

Once I'd done away with the idea that life always had to be good, things started to look up for me. What lies behind true acceptance isn't hard work, but the process of self-love. It's natural at first to be angry at how unfair the world is. And we'll probably stay angry for a while. However, over time, we learn to accept ourselves, and the day comes when we can work hard without feeling bitter about it. 'Make the best of what you have': though cliched, only by taking this statement to heart can we move on. We must give up on trying to get the good things effort-free; only then will we open our eyes to the good we already have. Living as our authentic selves involves fully

accepting that we weren’t born as the person we want to become. There’s nothing wrong with a bit of effort. That’s where life’s beauty lies.

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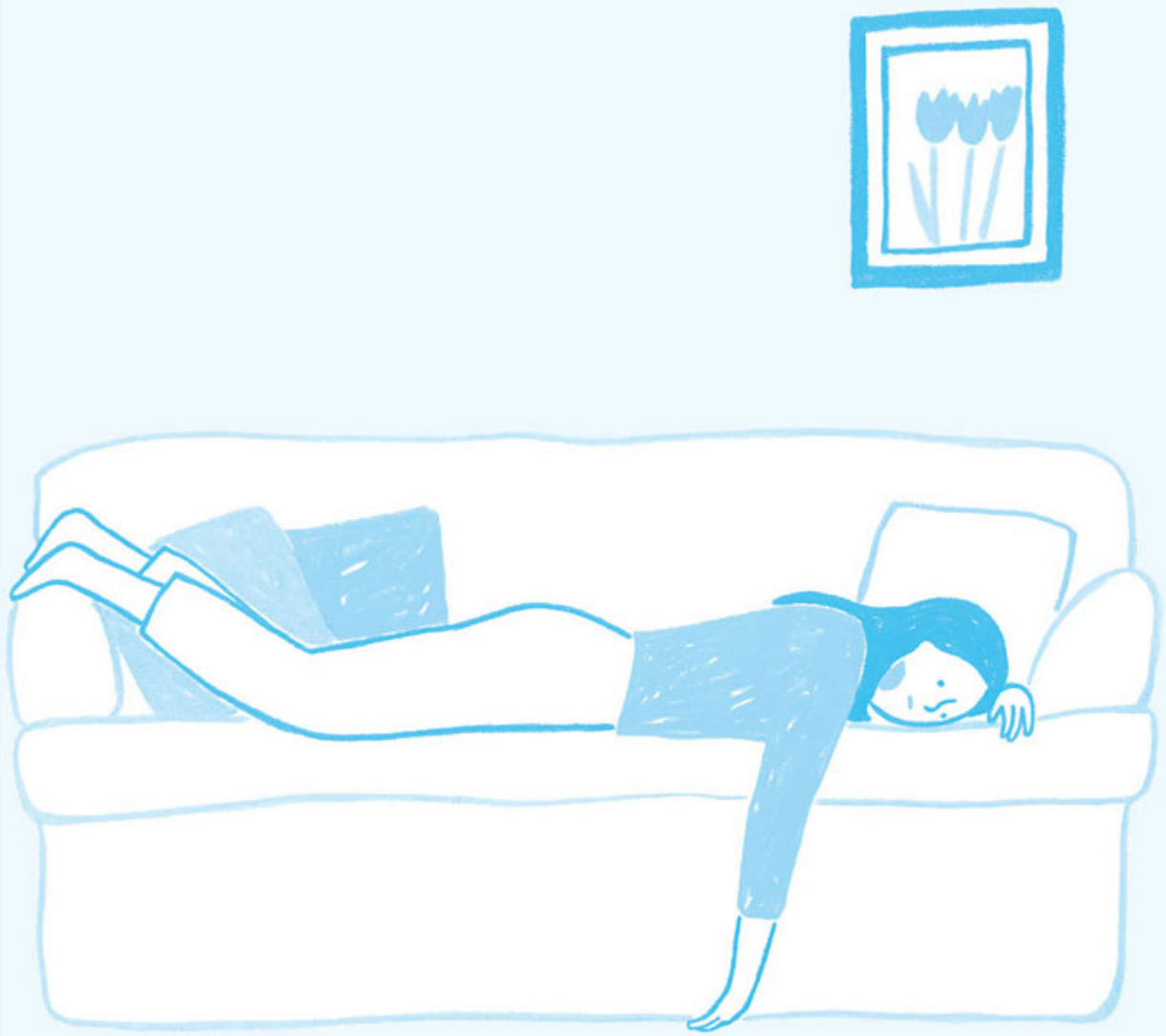
MY LITTLE TIPS FOR RECHARGING AN EMPTY HEART

When I Want to Live Recklessly, But Don’t Have the Courage

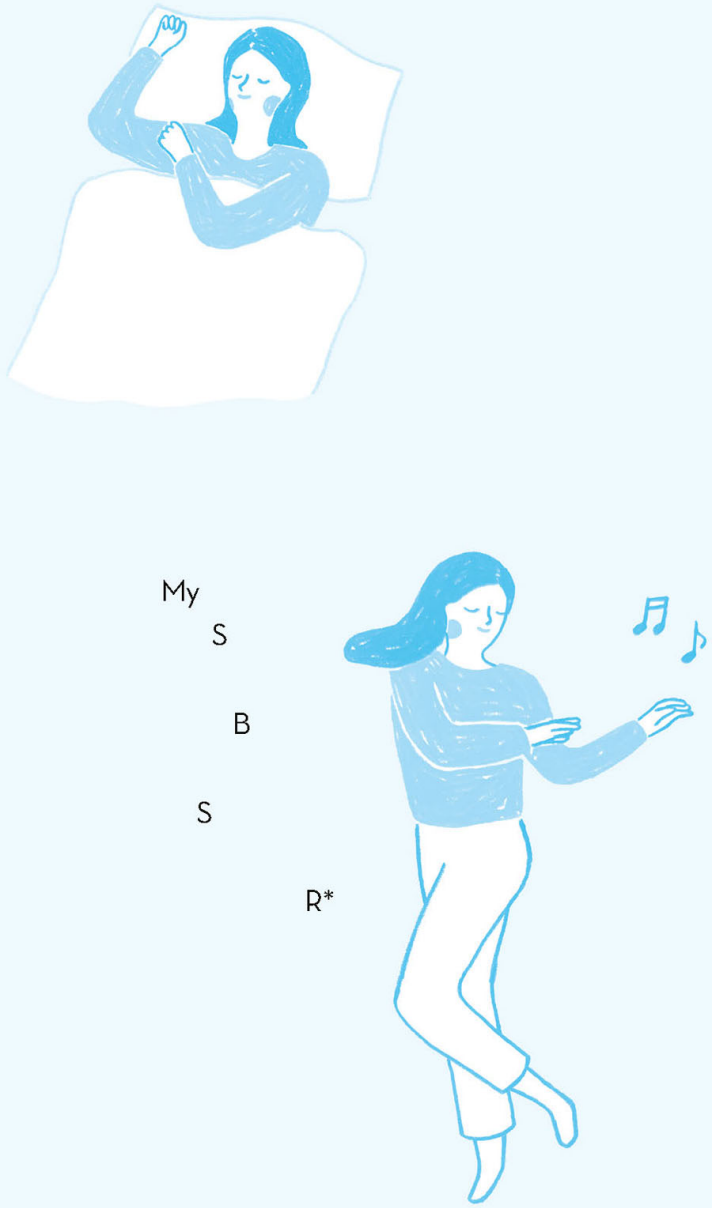


Sometimes I want to live recklessly.

Getting just one even though it’s on special offer.

Dressing without caring what people think.

Going to bed without washing my face.



SMALL BUT SURE REBELLIONS

When the daily grind gets us down, and the thought of tomorrow doesn't exactly fill us with excitement, we feel like living life a little more recklessly. If it's difficult to work up the courage, try an act of small but sure rebellion. Whether that's using a few more sheets of toilet roll than usual, or ignoring an unimportant task – even trivial things such as these provide a reprieve from reality. When you're unable to travel somewhere far away and feel suffocated, I recommend wandering round your neighbourhood and acting like a tourist. It might sound odd, but once you try it, you'll see how fun it is.

WHY NOT?

Sometimes, though there is no reason to do something, there is also no reason *not* to. Choosing to take such actions adds variety and excitement to life. If we paid a little less attention to what others thought, and broke away slightly from our everyday routines, wouldn't that make today a lot more fun?

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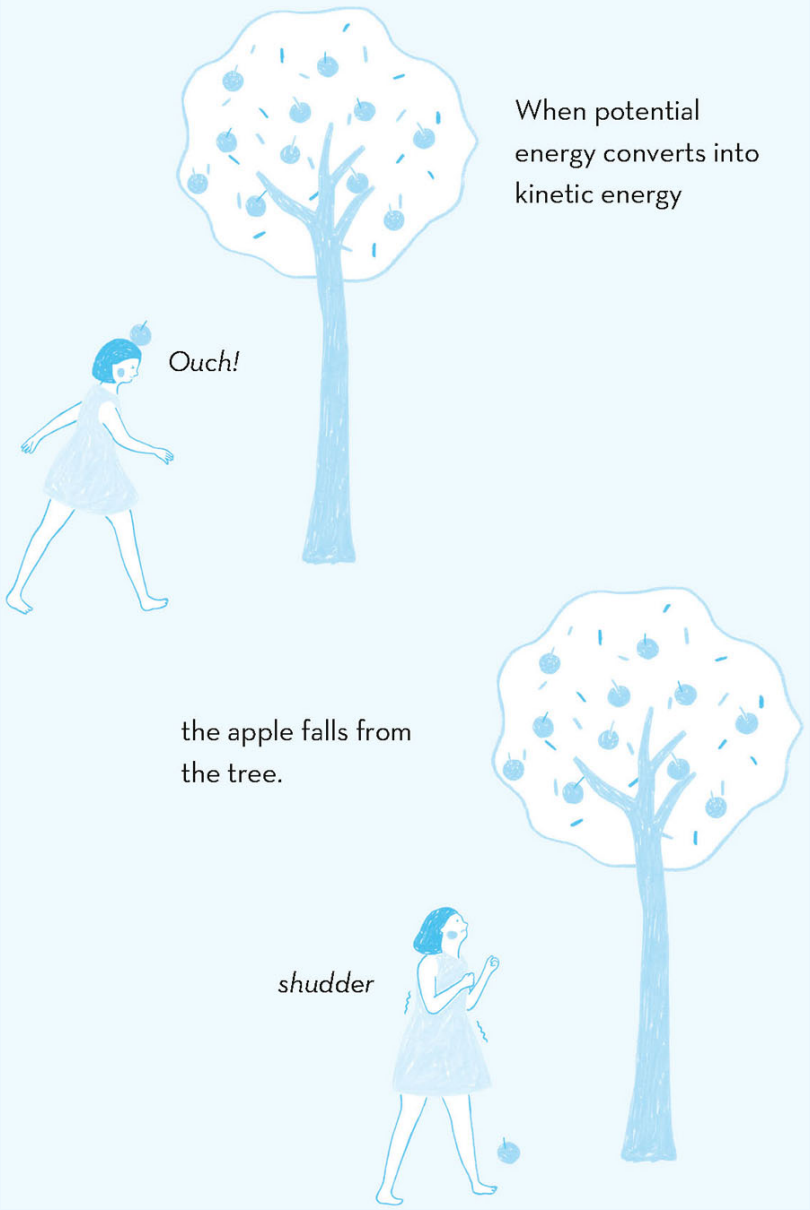
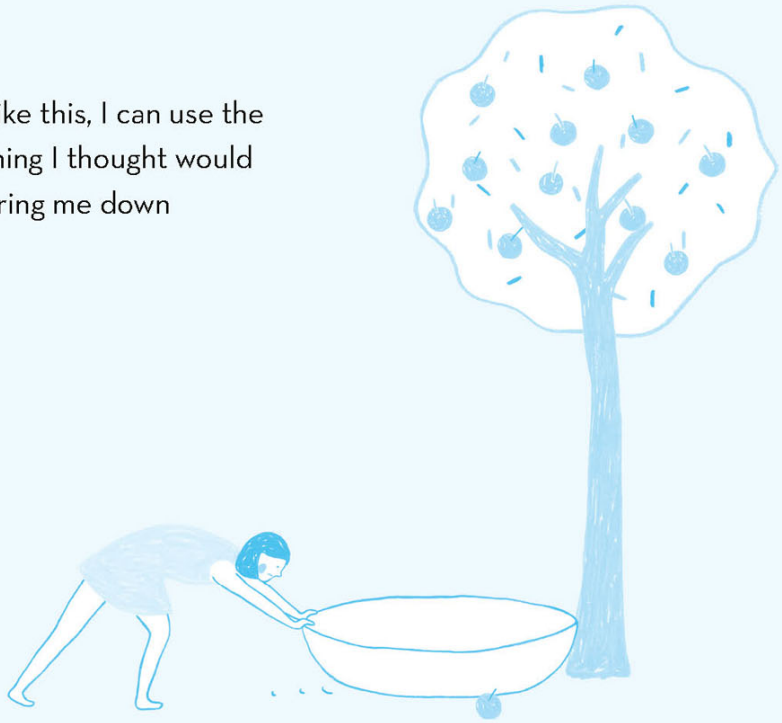
When Negative Emotion Bubbles Over



Like this, I can use the thing I thought would bring me down



as motivation for tomorrow's me.

*Don't try this at home.

Even if the emotion
is negative

I'm angry . . . !!!

all I need to do is convert it using
a method of my choice.

USING NEGATIVE EMOTION TO OUR ADVANTAGE

Sometimes the bad things all seem to come along at once. We are left unsure whether our situation is to blame, or whether we're the ones giving ourselves a hard time. Try using the negative emotions triggered by unpleasant situations as motivation. If we don't process negative emotions in good time, they can pile up, and eventually develop into depression and lead to low energy. Thus, when a situation triggers these feelings, we mustn't miss the opportunity to redirect the emotion.

IN THE END, IT'S ALL THE SAME EMOTIONAL ENERGY

Just because we experience negative emotions, doesn't make us bad people. After all, positive energy from past events is broken down by our bodies and converted into pain and rage – in the end, it's all the same energy, no matter what form it takes on. Turning the emotion on its head will therefore not only make us feel better, but allow us to move forward in the direction we wish.

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MY LITTLE TIPS FOR RECHARGING AN EMPTY HEART

When I Seem to Be the Only One Treading Water

1. Compare yourself to how you once were

2. Only blow the good things out of proportion

3. Blaming others is better than self-reproach

1. COMPARE YOURSELF TO HOW.. YOU ONCE WERE

When it feels like life is at a standstill, despite all the efforts you're putting in, compare yourself to how you once were. Close your eyes and picture yourself at your lowest. Next, separate your current self from this past 'you'. That person is someone completely different to who you are now. By comparing the past and present 'us', we can see the positive changes we've made, no matter how small.

2. ONLY BLOW THE GOOD THINGS OUT.. OF PROPORTION

We tend to overanalyse the bad things in life. When we're in a bad place emotionally, we minimise the things we've done well, and are 200% likely to blow the things we haven't out of proportion. Our thoughts are influenced by our emotions, and when we're feeling low, it's easy to think negatively. My hope is that you'll keep blowing the good things – which you discovered about yourself in the previous paragraph – out of proportion. If you find yourself dwelling on mistakes you've made, think of them as belonging to the past you.

3. BLAMING OTHERS IS BETTER THAN SELF-REPROACH

We've been brought up to believe that it's wrong to blame others, but for those of us who engage in a lot of self-censorship and are quick to feel guilt, it's okay to put others at fault from time to time. Let's try blaming others for the insignificant things, and see only what we want to see. Like so, our hearts will become a little lighter.

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PART 02

A BORING DAY ADULTING

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11
What Does It Mean to Be an Adult? 1

What does it mean to be an adult?

Even when I’m feeling low, I smile my way through the work day

and at the end of it all, I buy a beer with my own money.

I pour my gloom into the glass and down my throat.

I leave tomorrow’s worries to tomorrow, laugh it all off

and feel rather proud of myself.

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IS THIS WH AT YOU CALL ADULTING?

Physically, creeping fine lines and widening pores make it clear that we're well into adulthood, but there are also moments when we feel adult at heart, too:

- When there's an opportunity to party into the early hours, but we prefer to head home for an early night.
- When we relate less to Bart and Lisa, and feel more for Homer and Marge.
- When we no longer get excited by snow.
- When we stay poker-faced regardless of how we feel, and quietly power through the day.

As the years go by, life only gets more complicated, and we start to crave the simple things, meanwhile shoving the noisy parts of ourselves into a bottle, which begins to keel over. We begin to think that opening up to our friends, who we used to tell everything, will only come back to bite us. Or perhaps we don't want to expend our energy on bringing up a negative topic, and so leave out key details. We want to go to sleep and forget. After all, tomorrow will bring its own problems.

That may all sound gloomy. Sometimes I find myself, however, feeling a fuzzy sense of pride: *maybe this is what it means to be an adult!* Perhaps I'm like a child wanting to be praised for how grown up I am, but who cares?

It's not a gold sticker that grown-ups need at the end of a hard day's work, but a 'Job well done!' prize. For me, that's a cold beer, bought with my hard-earned cash!

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12
What Does It Mean to Be an Adult? 2

What does it mean to be an adult?

When some pain-in-the-ass spouts nonsense

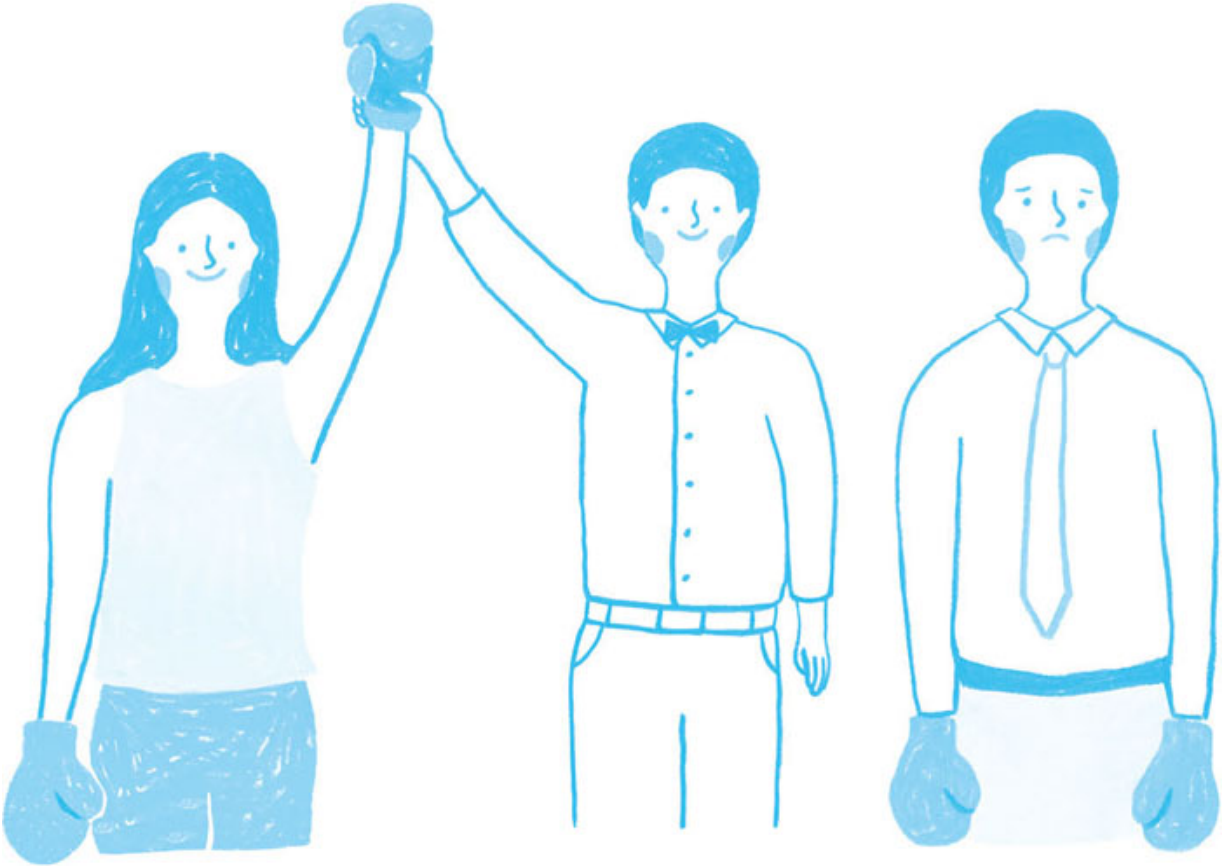
instead of going through the effort of laying it all out to him

By the way, did you change your hair loss treatment? It looks so much thicker.

Oh gosh, how tactless of me!

I can act the fool and just laugh.

YOU WIN



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13
Though I’m Crying on the Inside Again Today

Everyone’s smiling
again today.

Are they really
all okay?

I wish there was an ‘it’s-okay-to-say-you’re-not-okay’ bus stop.

I wish there was someone there to tell me that it’s okay not to be okay.

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SOCIAL SMILE

Sometimes, I don’t feel like speaking. I don’t feel like moving my facial muscles at all, for that matter. That’s why, when I’m alone, my face is generally static. I need to make a living, and therefore have to talk to people – at these times, I do my best to pull the appropriate expressions. However, whether it’s when I’m working, when I meet up with friends, or even when I’m with my family, it feels as if the emotional labour never stops.

As adults, because we know that everyone has their own problems, we don’t lean on anyone when we need support and instead brave it on our own. When we’re not okay, we wear a ‘social smile’ to hide the fact that we’re crying on the inside.

Everyone else seems to be getting along fine – why am I the only one struggling so much? Or maybe other people are pulling a different expression on the inside, too? Knowing I’m not the only one having a hard time doesn’t necessarily mean I’ll get better, but knowing I’m not so alone can be a source of encouragement.

If only we could admit to each other when we’re not okay.

‘It’s okay not to be okay.’

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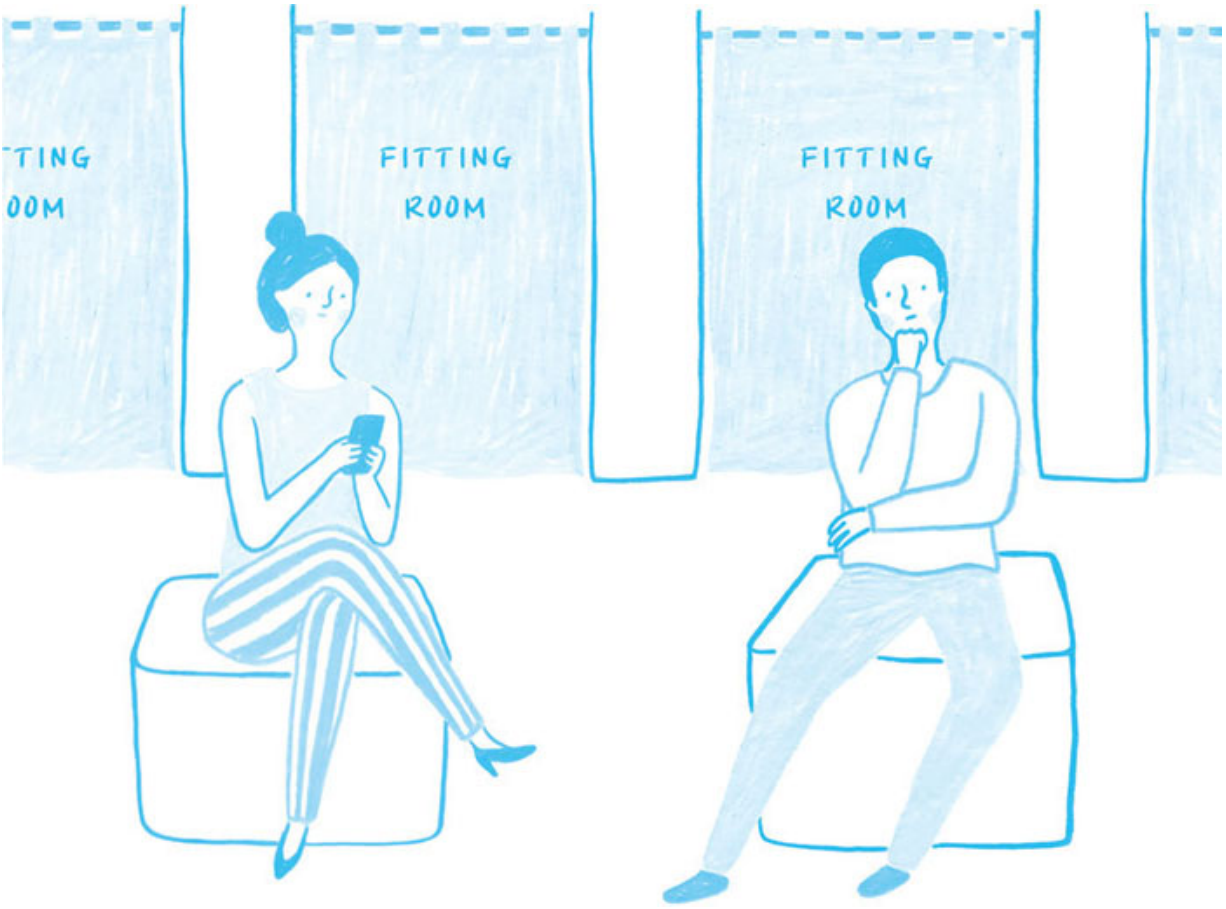
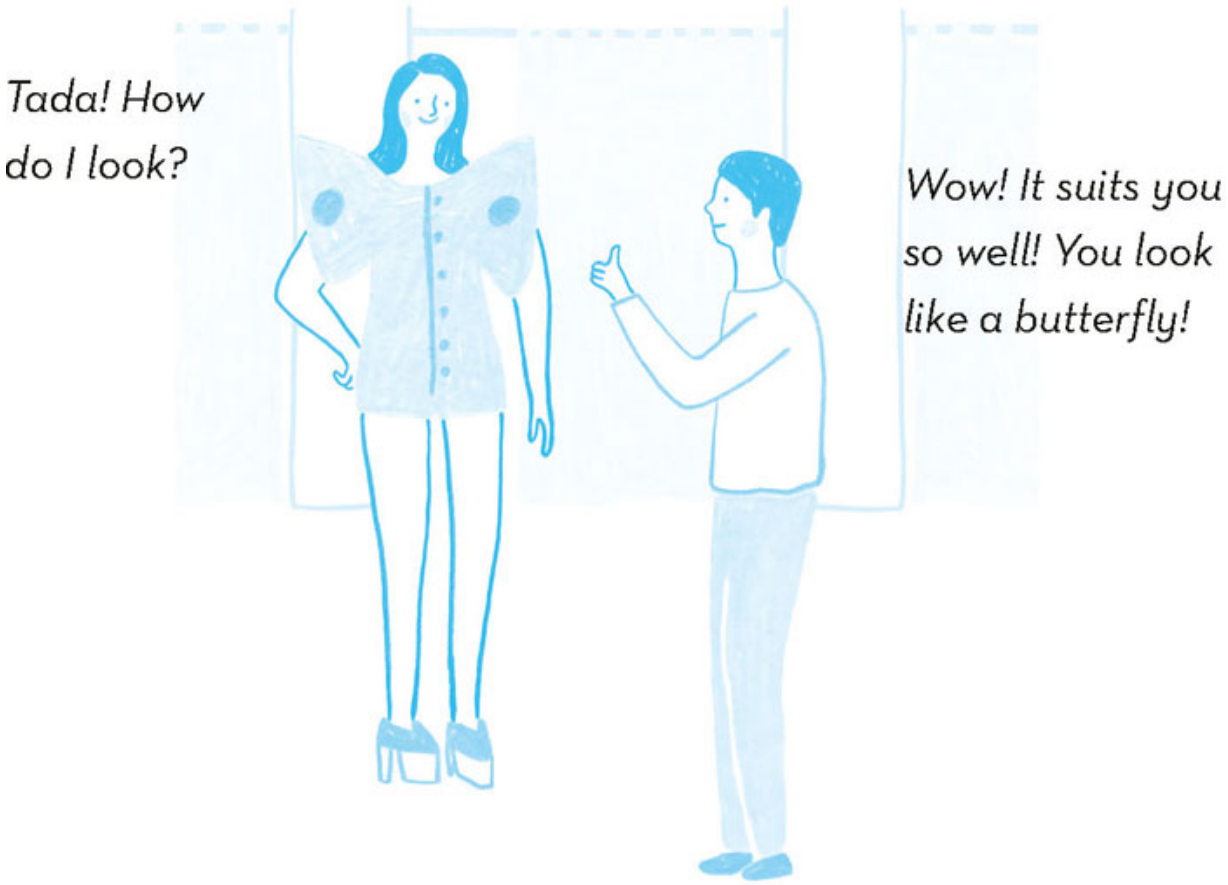
14
You Think Honesty's Attractive?



I used to believe that honesty was the best policy



and thought it was fake not to reveal my true feelings.

I didn’t know that my honesty could be seen as rude.

We need to be able to distinguish between white lies and fakeness.

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SOMETIMES I MISS MINDLESS CHITCH AT

I used to be put off by people who only spoke about the good, fun things in life, and thought they were full of hot air. By contrast, I believed that true connection only came from sharing our struggles and weaknesses. And so, the closer I was to someone, the more I focused our conversations around how hard life was and the pain I felt deep inside. For me, I was sending the message: ‘This is how much of a close friend you are to me’.

One time, I’d had a long day of work, and someone was telling me about their troubles. Being on the receiving end like this, I realised that what I’d considered a sign of closeness could actually cause the other person stress. And after a few days of listening to the same problems, the compassion I’d once felt vanished. Entering the real world of adulthood, I was pushed from pillar to post, and each day only got harder. I began to doubt whether adding to someone else’s burdens at the end of a long day was what real friends did. Little by little, I began to yearn for the chitchat I’d once seen as superficial.

For some people, fun and light conversation can be their way of opening up. There are all sorts of people in the world and all sorts of ways that they share their hearts. The desire to laugh and joke around with everyone at the end of a hard day – there’s probably a white lie beneath this, too. Sometimes a white lie or a joke can create breathing space in a conversation. This is different from putting on airs or hiding your true intentions. It’s an act of consideration towards those you care about, and is also a refined, modern technique of expression.

If beyond our humour there is authenticity, then we are still being ourselves, even without exposing every layer of our pain.

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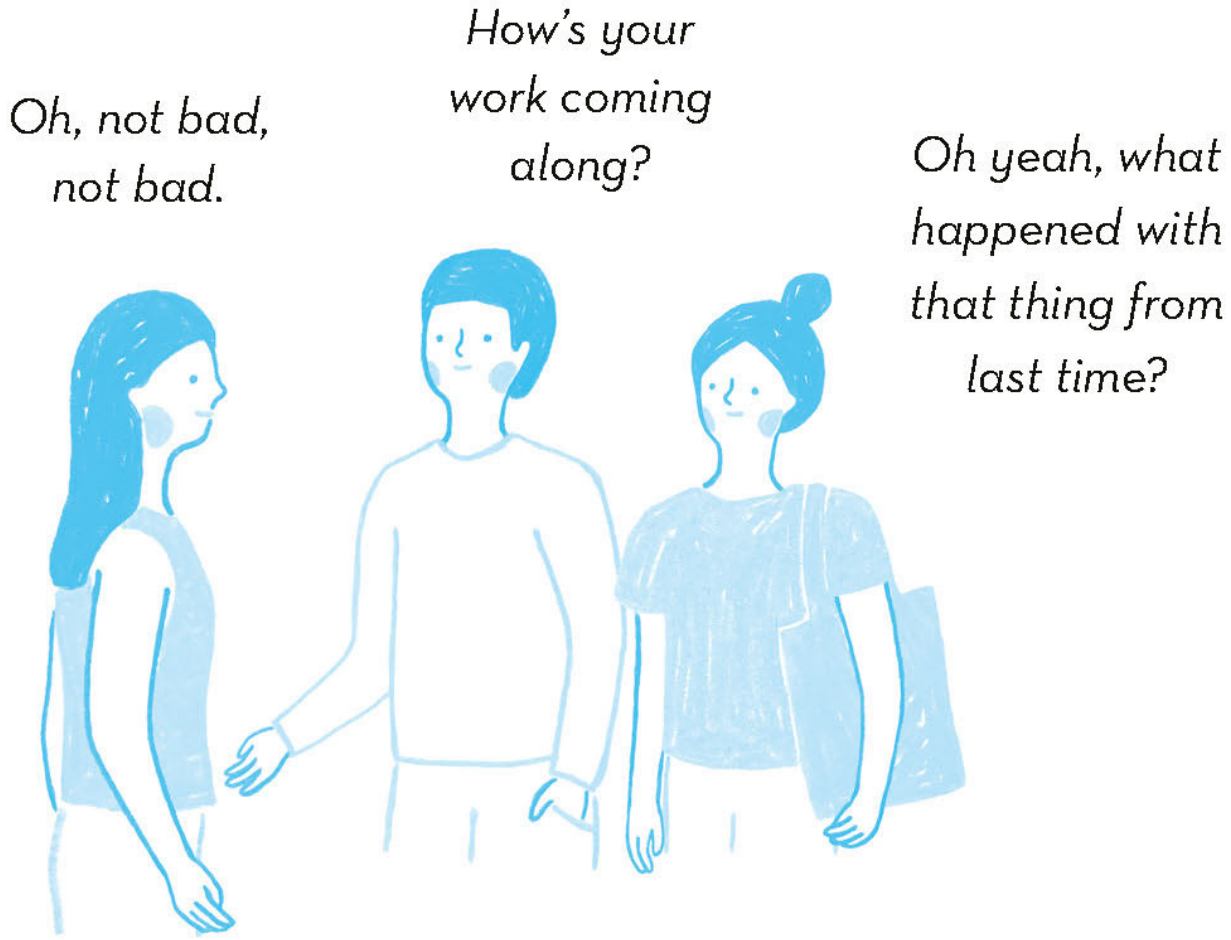
15
I Spent the Whole Day Being Self-conscious Again

Poor communication makes me feel self-conscious.



Because I only focus on how I'm coming across

there are relationships, but no ‘people’.

After all, in a world filled with just me,

everyone else fades out.

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A LACK OF REAL COMMUNICATION

I care a lot about what others think, but I also struggle to read the room, which makes dealing with people difficult. Being told I'm tactless, despite the fact that I'm constantly walking on eggshells, feels unfair. People like me have a high chance of developing social anxiety. We use up so much brainpower trying to deal with the anxiety, it's no wonder we have less capacity to focus on other people and understand what's going on around us.

A fear of making mistakes and feeling pressured to come across well can make social interactions more difficult. *How are they perceiving me right now? What if they think I'm ignorant?* Our heads are ram-packed with such anxieties, so much so that we don't *see* the person we're conversing with. And so we say something completely off topic, or just smile awkwardly, unsure of what to say. We don't have the mental space to pay attention to the other person, and so no words come to mind.

When we feel self-conscious like this, our focus shifts towards ourselves – in reality, we aren't considering the other person, which makes genuine communication difficult. Naturally, this makes it hard to build relationships. In the end, our anxieties and pessimistic expectations become reality, confirming our predictions, which only strengthens misguided beliefs. *I knew I was the problem in this relationship. I'm better off alone.* In relationships, 'you' and 'I' must coexist, but in our case here, there is no 'other person as I see them' or 'me as I see myself'. The only person who exists is 'me worrying about how I'll come across'. However, this is not because we're

insensitive, but because we're highly anxious and are barely managing to take care of ourselves.

So, for those of us who get nervous talking to people, we need to be careful not to put all our energy into catering to others. Adapting ourselves entirely to others doesn't equate to being considerate. As long as we genuinely embrace the other person, our sincerity will come across.

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16
What Am I Crying for?

I want to cry but the tears won’t fall.

Sometimes I want to get up and leave it all behind, but that’s easier said than done.

So inside, I cry.

Am I a real adult now?

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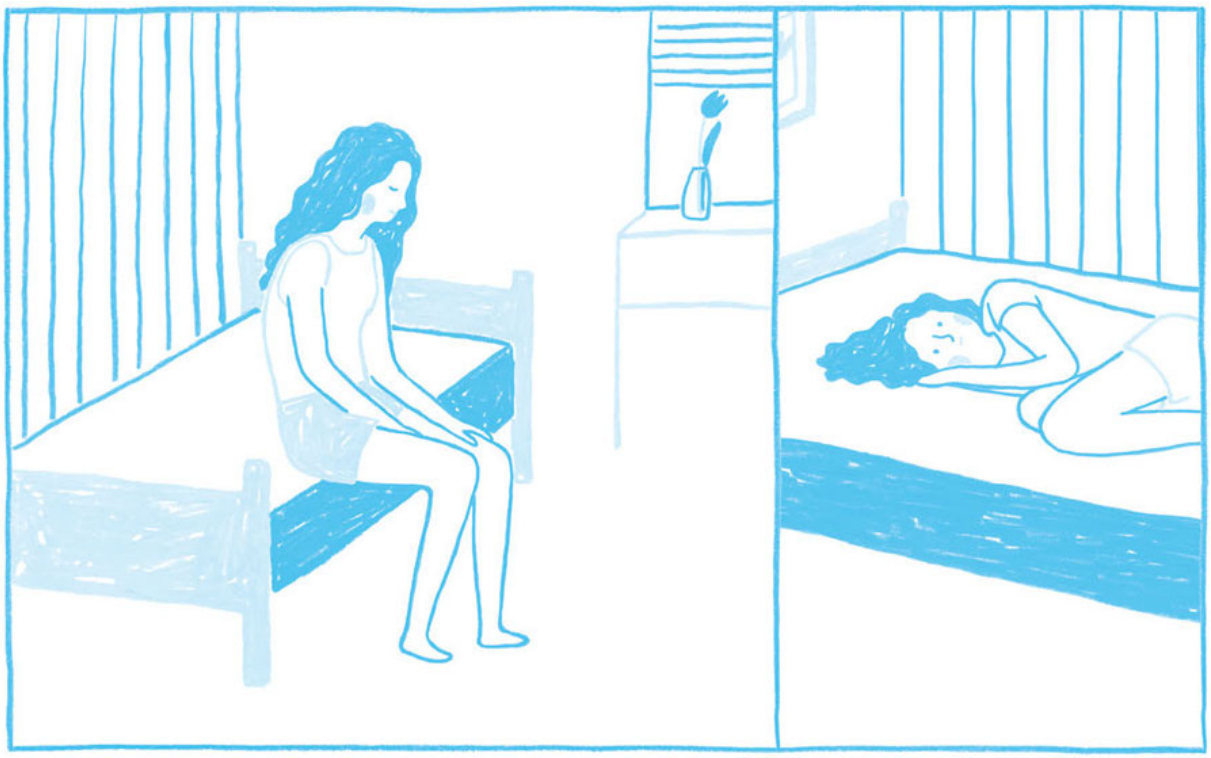
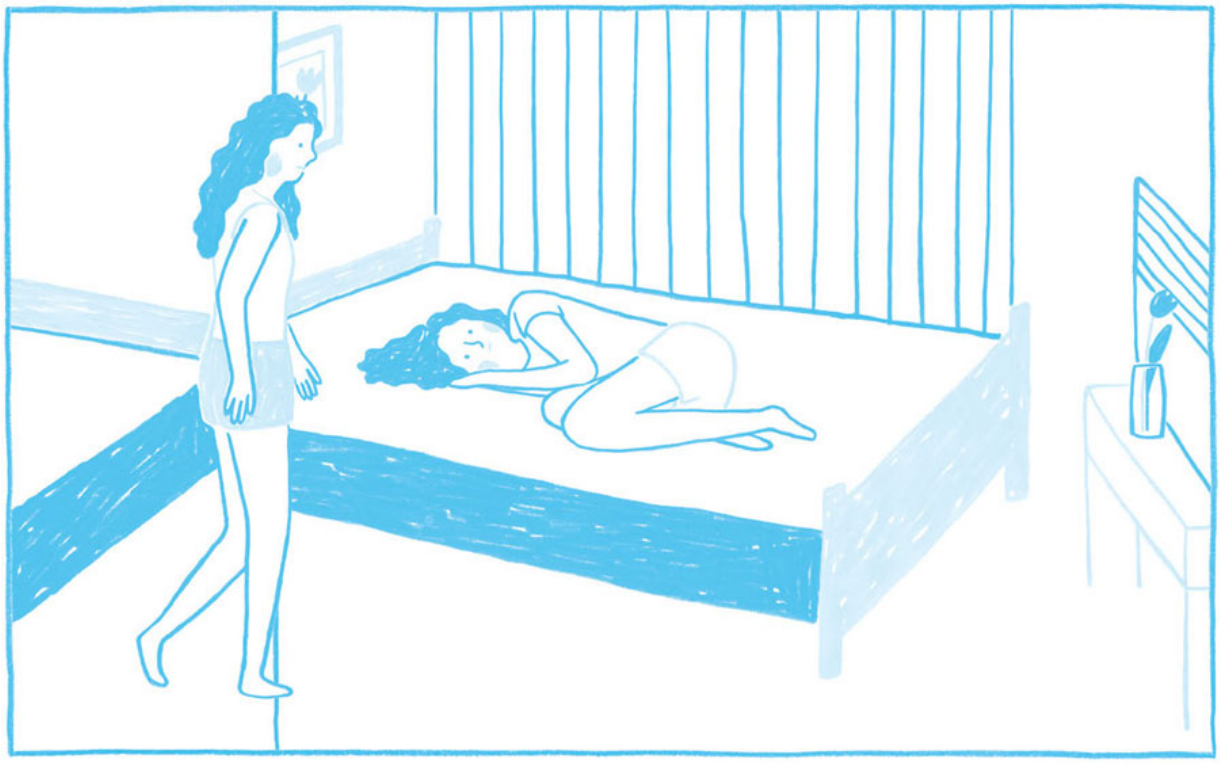
17
I’ve Had Enough of Being Bad



Just because I did something bad in the past, doesn’t mean I’m a bad person.



We all make mistakes every once in a while.

None of us are perfect, after all.

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I DID SOMETHING BAD, BUT THAT DOESN’T MAKE ME A BAD PERSON

A few years ago, a famous pop singer came to perform in South Korea. They didn’t arrive or leave the country according to schedule, and never made it to rehearsals – their blasé attitude caused a great uproar all over social media. In South Korea, once-expectant fans took to the artist’s social media page and flooded it with criticism and complaints. Of course, the singer’s actions were careless and unprofessional, and the concert organisers needed to take responsibility. However, I was struck by how little tolerance society has for celebrities who lack humility. It’s of course right to criticise abuse of power. However, though humility may be seen as a virtue, we hold those with fame or power to extremely high standards, and when these individuals display even the slightest unkindness or arrogance, we respond with excessive censorship and disapproval.

Rather than being due to some character flaw, the singer’s actions may simply have been a reflection of a natural human tendency. We are easily influenced by the situations and environments around us, and perhaps our morals are fragile by nature. That’s why we need to be even more on guard – so that we don’t allow our vision to be clouded by the good things in our lives, or try to use difficult situations to justify our behaviour.

Just because we’re adults, doesn’t mean we’re more grown up. We are still immature, we still cause others hurt, we still regret and reflect on our actions, and then we repeat the same mistakes all over again. We do all sorts of bad things, but maybe this is simply proof

that we are human. And so, when we feel remorse for something we've done, we need to draw the line before self-reflection turns into undue self-reproach. All we need to do is try to become a slightly better version of the person we once were. Let's not conflate our wrong or foolish actions with our self-worth.

The more we try to run away from the past, the more it comes to find us. Then, when we try to grab hold of it, it slips through our fingers. If the past is eating away at your present, how about hiding under the duvet, closing your eyes, and going to meet the past you? The person in your head could be you as a child, as a teenager, or even you yesterday.

Go, and without a word, pull yourself into a tight embrace. Repeat this process over and over, until you know in the depths of your heart that you're not a bad person.

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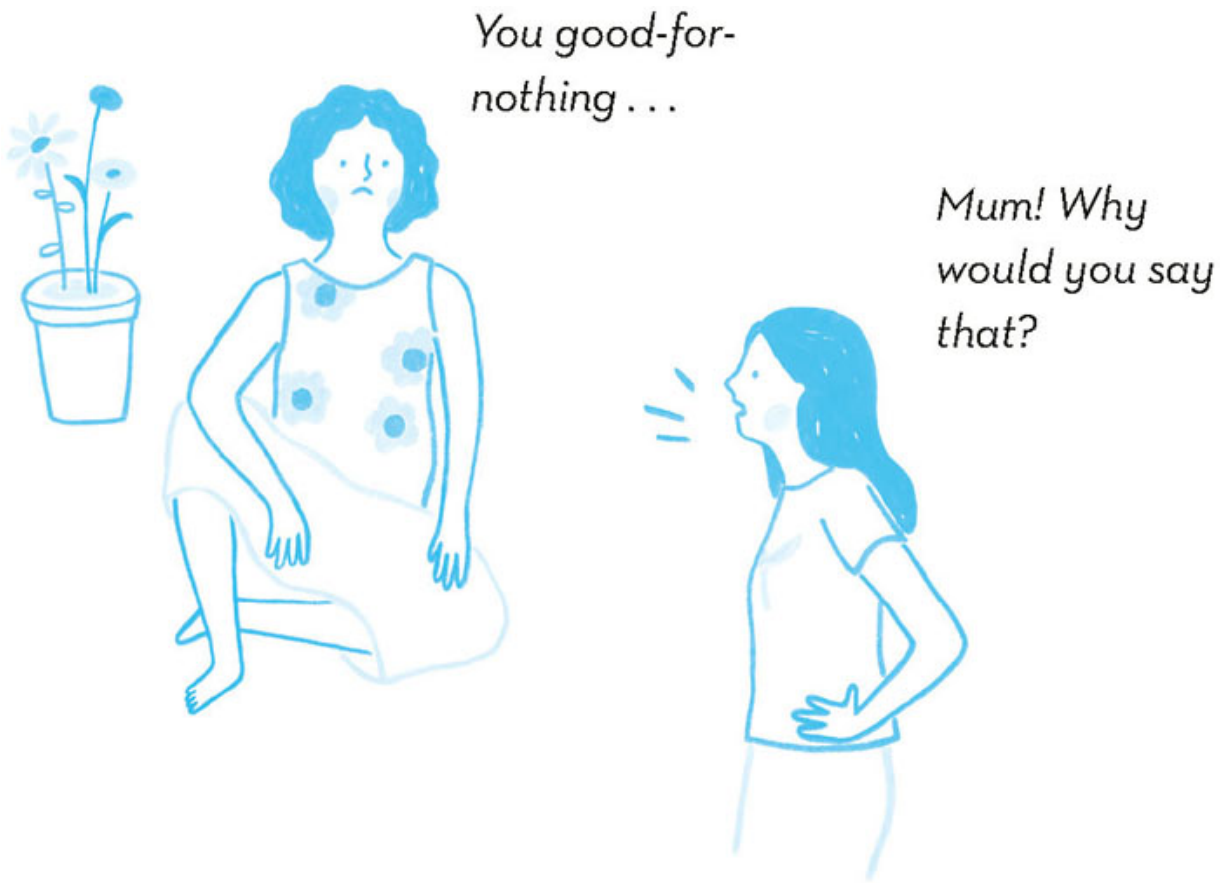
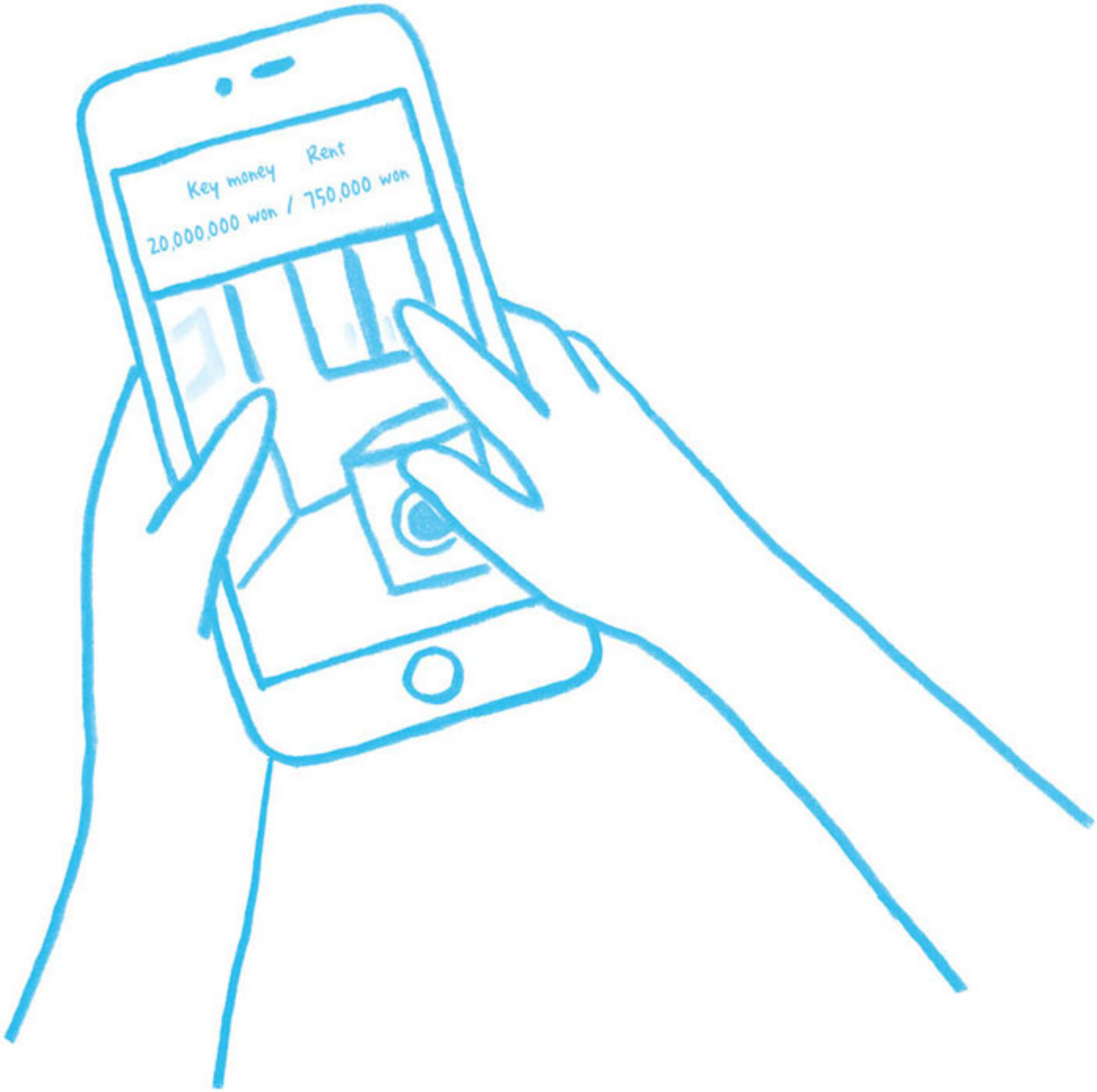
18
Dreams of Moving Out



No matter how old I get, I still fight with my mum.

This time, I'm really going to leave. Just try and stop me . . .

Each time, I dream of moving out



but I’m broke.

I’d better be nicer to my mum.

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19
Why Can’t You Say No?

If you’re a people-pleaser

People-pleasing Sweet Potato (aged 23) / unable to say no to anyone

Straightforward Pumpkin (aged 25) / just a straightforward pumpkin

or if you're someone who can't say no, remember two things.

One, don’t do any big favours unless you want to.

Two, don't expect big favours from other people, either.

If you can do as much as this, 80% of your relationship problems will be solved.

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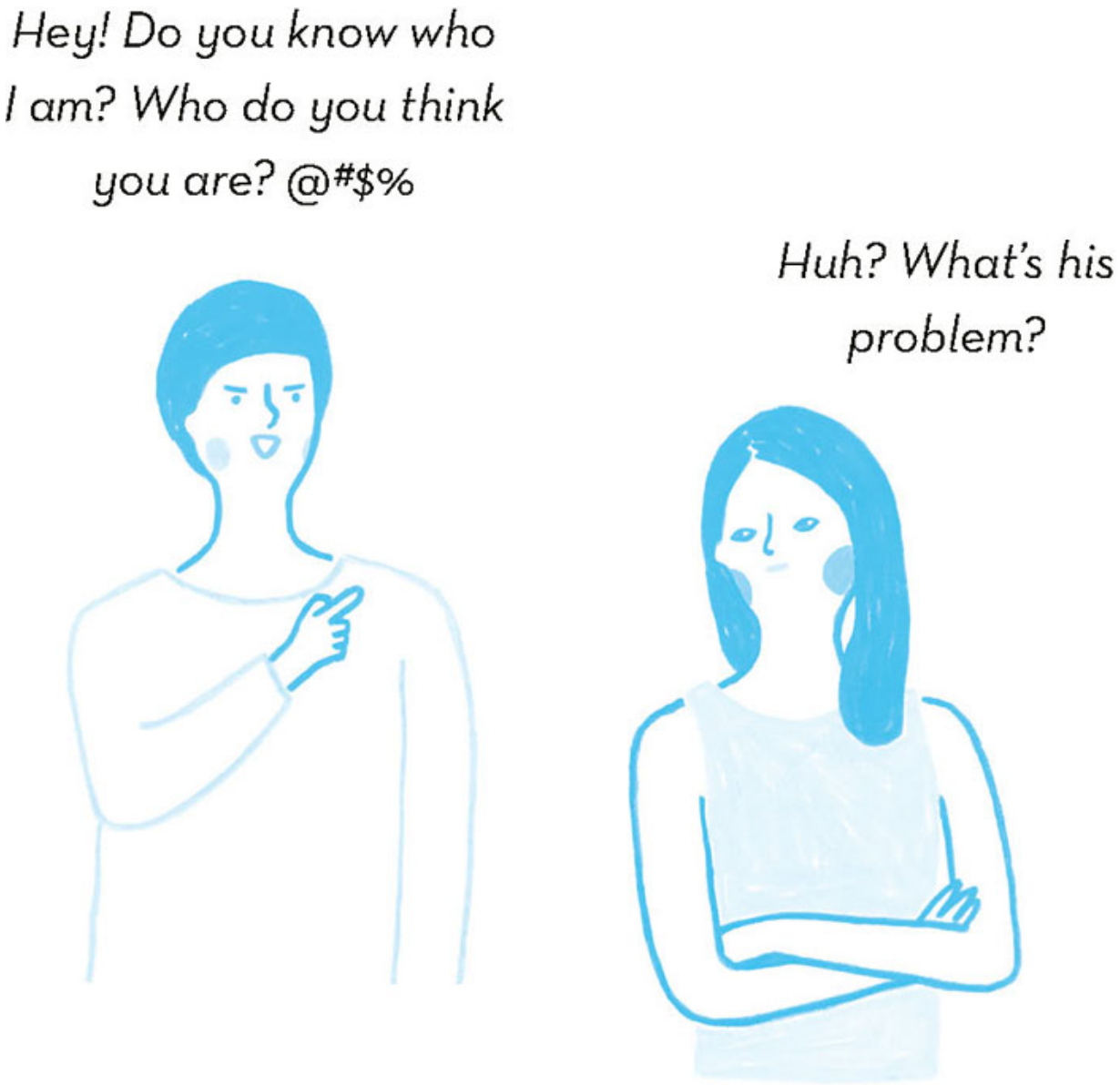
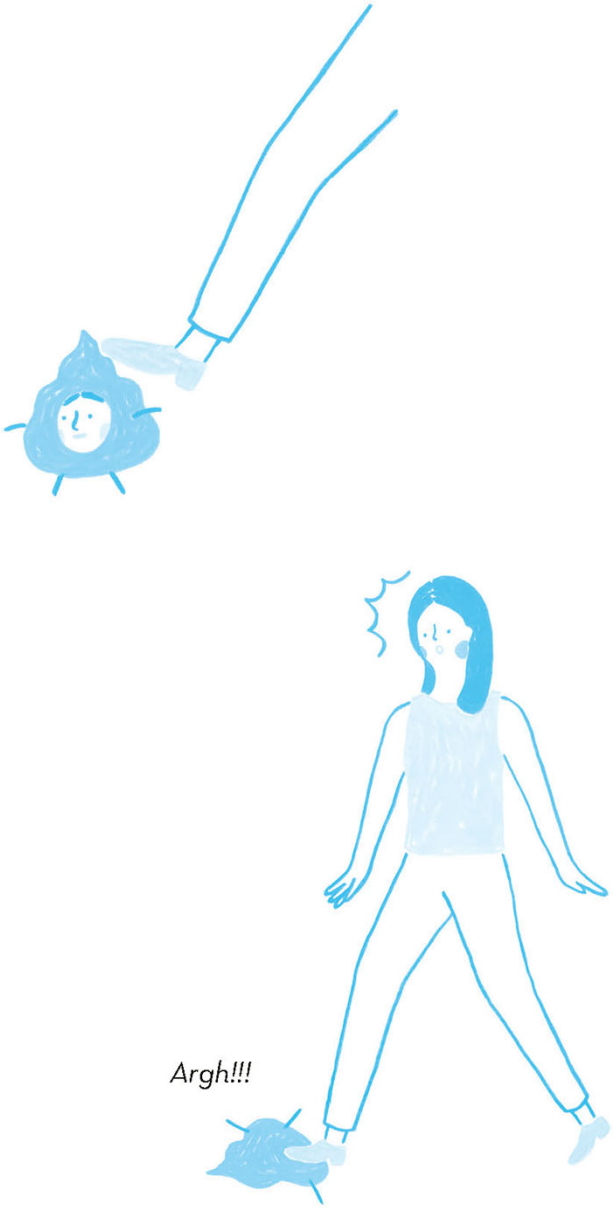
20
I Stepped in Shit Again Today

In life, we'll encounter strange and unfair situations.



Shit happens for no reason.



It’s not for lack of effort or vigilance.

It’s something beyond our control.

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ALERT: SELF-ESTEEM THIEF

I trod lightly in shit again today. Throughout our careers, we meet all sorts of odd people, and just when we think we've met them all, a new 'weirdo' appears. It's hard to believe just how many strange people there are in the world. Amongst these, pay particular caution to the 'self-esteem thief'. A self-esteem thief is someone who belittles others and makes them feel self-conscious, knocking their confidence. Most of the time, these individuals lay low, but when they catch sight of someone vulnerable, they pounce instinctively.

A while back, there was someone who used to support me whenever I was having a hard time, but then one day, something good happened to me. Out of nowhere, they played down my accomplishment and suggested that I didn't deserve it. Before, they would always compare my misfortune to their own situation, which gave them a sense of superiority and made them feel good about themselves.

Then, there's the type that only comes around when they're going through a rough patch. Naturally, we're grateful they come to us when they're in need. That must mean that they trust us. At some point, though, it gets to be too much. Night and day, they come to us to moan, and suck our energy like a vampire. Then, they disappear without even saying goodbye. We need to tell them 'Stop!' before things get out of hand. If we act as others' 'emotional rubbish bin' for too long, they'll start to take us for granted. If we let others take advantage of us like this, over time, our self-esteem will be affected.

Try as we might, however, sometimes getting caught up in unpleasant situations is unavoidable. In these moments, we need to take care not to fall into fatalistic patterns of thinking. *Why does this*

always happen to me? My horoscope wasn't good this month. No wonder . . . Maybe it's all my fault? We mustn't think like this. No matter how much of a good life we've lived, sometimes things just happen. Whatever situation we're facing, we shouldn't let it get the better of us.

Rather than try to isolate the cause, or change the situation itself, it's better to come up with an action plan. Firstly, when someone tries to put a dent in our self-esteem, rather than becoming a sponge, we should become a reflector. Instead of absorbing people's words and actions, we reflect them back. This isn't about getting revenge; all we need to do is let them know they've crossed the line. If we find this too hard, it's okay not to respond and to keep our distance. When we don't have the energy, getting into conflict can cause us harm.

It's important to understand how to separate the good that people have done for us in the past from the negative influence they are having on us in the present. Just because someone once made sacrifices for us, doesn't give them the right to hurt us now. If they truly value us, they won't make us hate ourselves.

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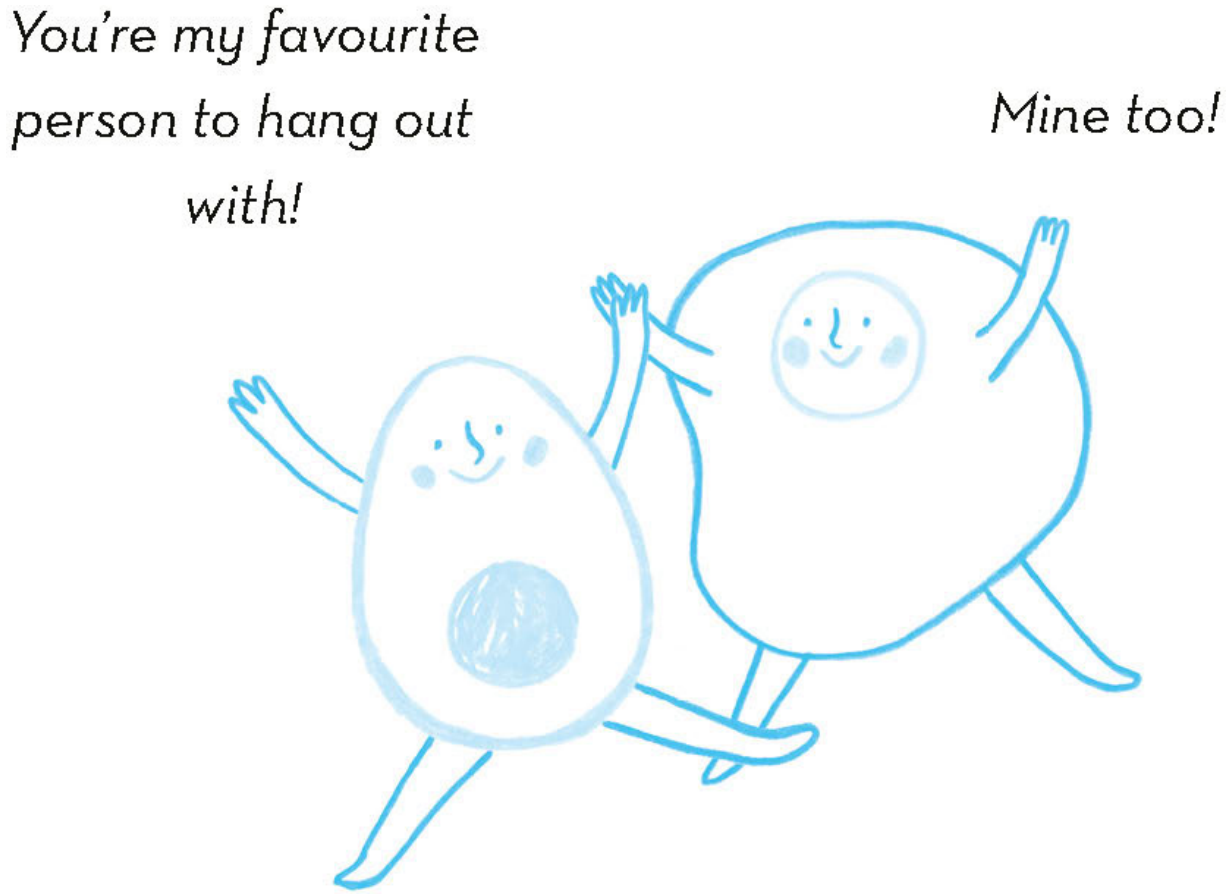
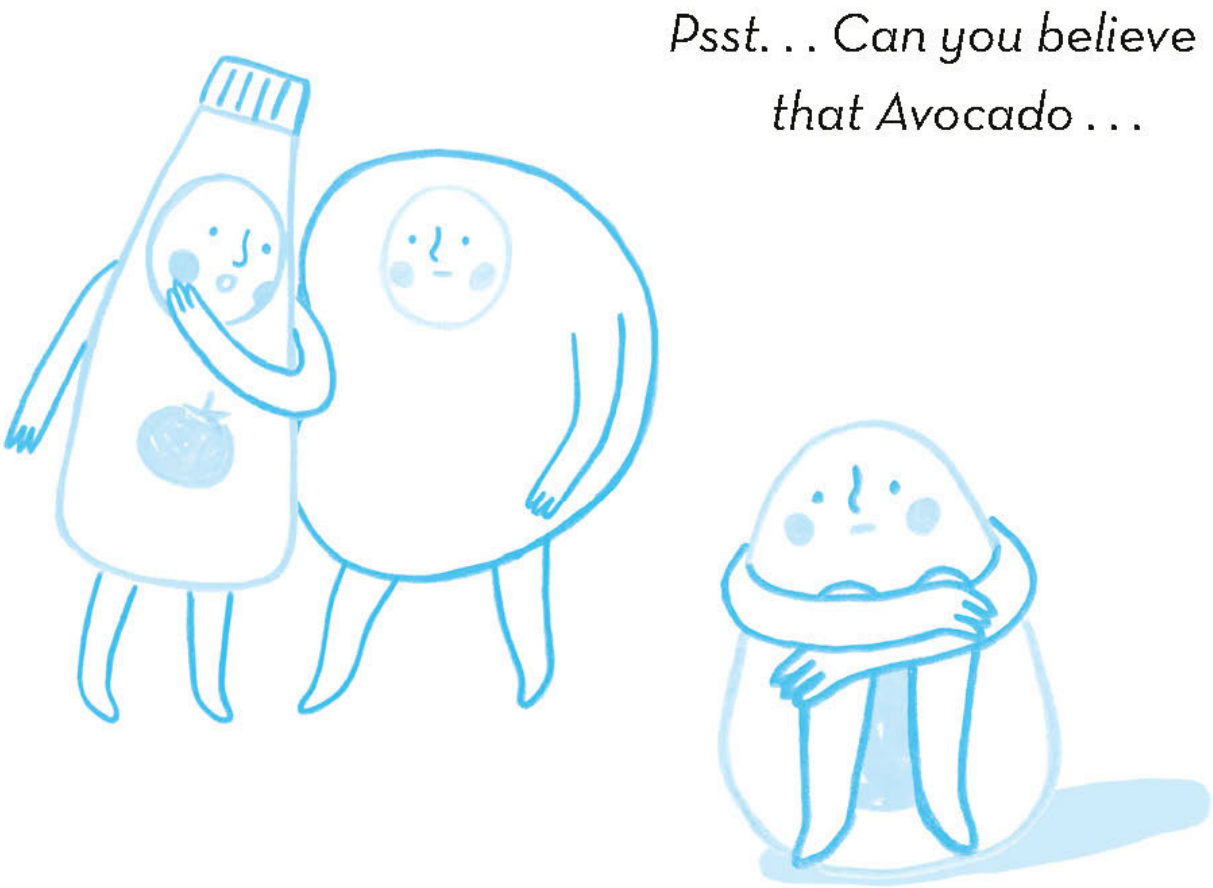
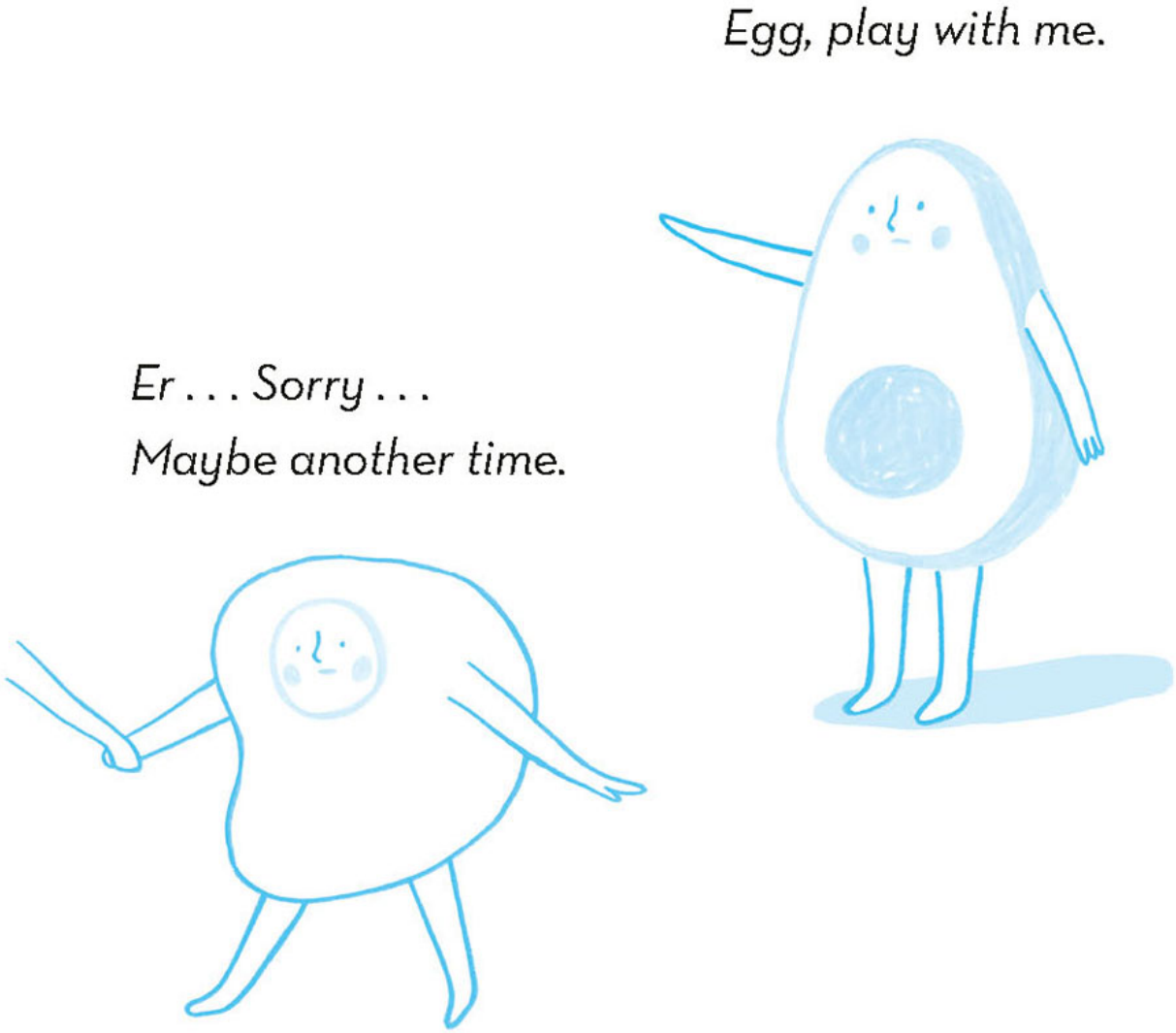
21
Do Relationships Have an Expiry Date, Too?



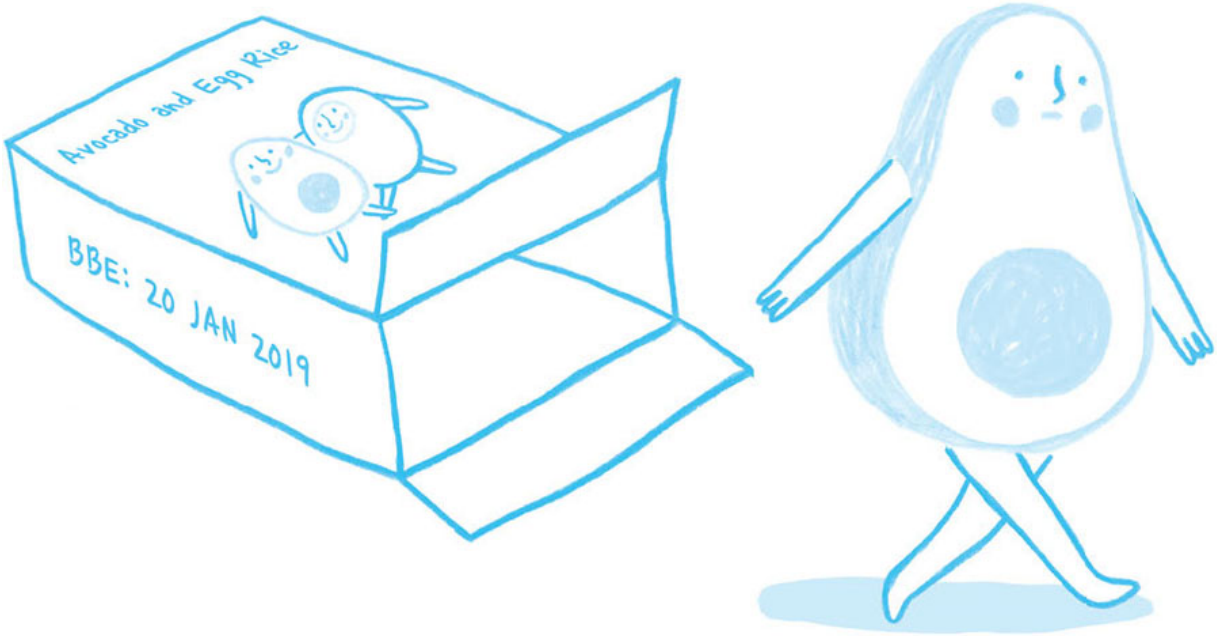
When cracks form in a relationship



through no fault of my own,



here’s what makes me feel better:



I tell myself that the relationship has passed its expiry date.

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AT THE END OF THE DAY, MY HEART COMES FIRST

Because I want to be alone, but also don't, and because I don't want to be the one who causes a relationship to fracture, I end up paying far too much attention to the people around me. Sometimes a minor incident, involving someone I never cared that much about to begin with, can completely ruin my day. It's at these times that I realise just how dependent I am on other people.

Because I'd made the mistake of seeing friends as 'people who share everything and always understand each other', I only put my closest companions in this category and relied on them far too much. Then, for some reason, out of nowhere the relationship would fall apart. I would suddenly feel isolated from the group, or sense that someone close to me was being distant. Not knowing the reason, I felt all the more helpless. I was too proud to try to repair the friendship myself, and so ended up sitting back and doing nothing.

Sometimes, it's good to let things be water under the bridge. This is easier said than done, however. So, once a relationship reaches its expiry date, we need to come up with our own strategies to keep our self-esteem from hitting rock bottom.

The friend we talk about work stuff with, the one we can share our family and relationship problems with, the friend we lean on when times are tough, the friend who's truly happy for us when something good happens in our lives. Depending on the person, some things are more comfortable to discuss than others. Leaning too much on a single individual is never a good idea, and instead we should come up with a variety of 'tools' to turn to when we're having a hard time. It doesn't need to be a person at all – it could be a dog, or an activity like going for walks, swimming, eating delicious fried

chicken, or learning a musical instrument. The possibilities are endless.

Though there may be no right answer when it comes to relationships, I firmly believe that they're at their best when we feel comfortable. Our hearts should always come first.

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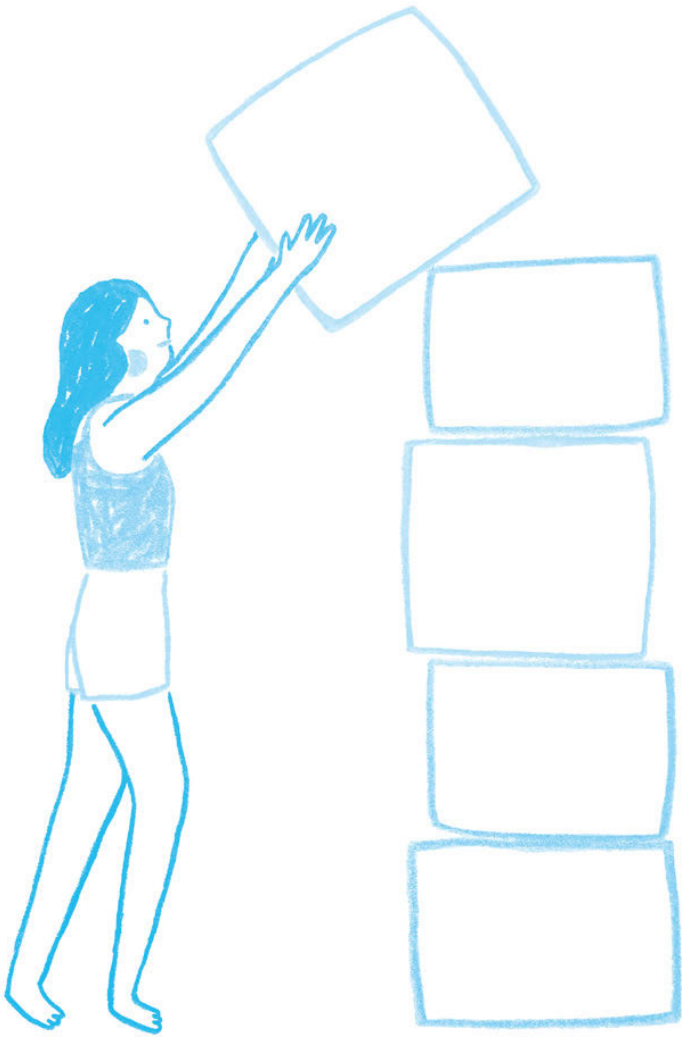
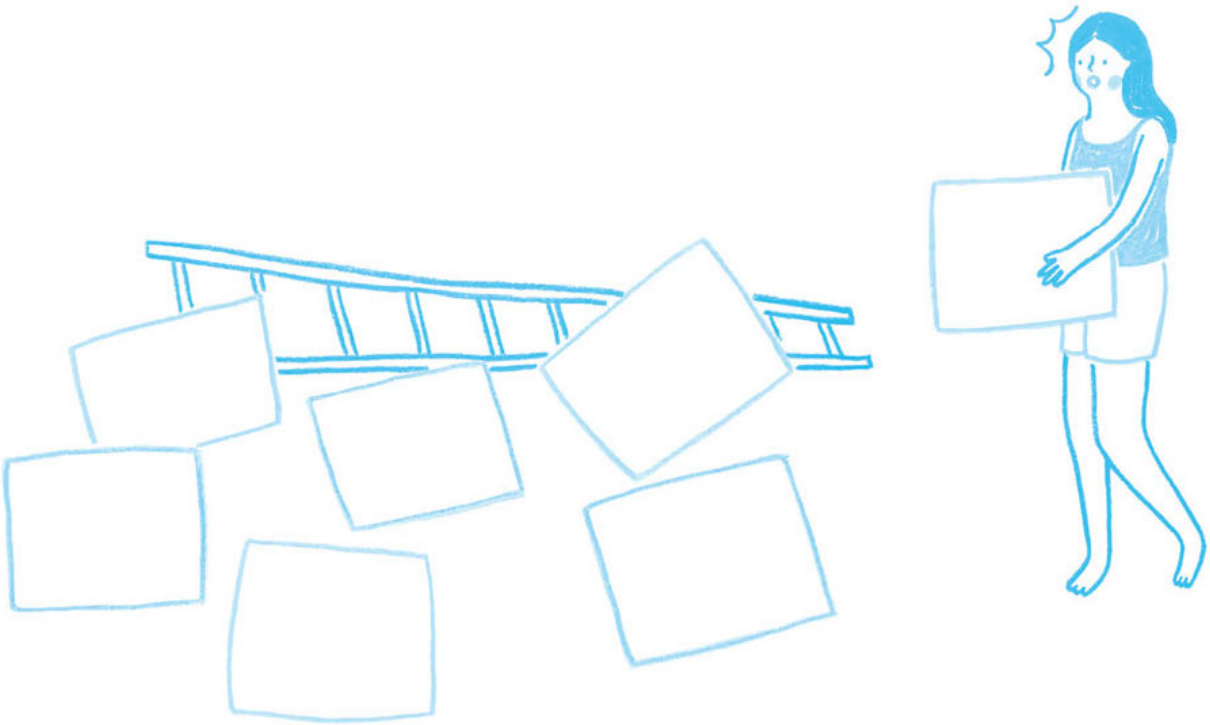
22
It’s Too Late to Start Now



I’m trying something, but no one knows how it’ll go.

So rather than always wishing for things to go well,



we need to be open to whatever might happen.

After all, real courage is having hope even in the face of potential disappointment.

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HOW NOT TO SET LIMITS ON OUR HEARTS

Isn’t it too late to start now? What if things don’t work out? When these kinds of dizzying thoughts flood my mind, sometimes all I want to hear is a cliched answer: ‘It’s okay. It’s never too late to start’, ‘Are you going to quit before you’ve even tried?’, or ’Everything’s going to be fine’.

I was a courageous child with big dreams, but I’ve become a coward who knows that some things won’t work out no matter how hard I try. These days, when it comes to dreaming, I spend a lot of time nitpicking and weighing things up. So, when I’m afraid my hard work won’t pay off, I adopt one of two attitudes. Either I dash my hopes in advance and think, ‘I’m not expecting anything. I don’t care if it doesn’t work out’, or otherwise I shout a positive affirmation of ‘Everything’s going to turn out great!’ In actuality, both are rationalisations to protect myself from the hurt of an unexpected outcome. I think that, underneath it all, my real voice is saying something like, ‘I want things to go well, but I’m scared I’ll be disappointed.’

When it comes down to it, we know the answer: that it’s too late to start now, and that things won’t work out regardless of the effort we put in. However, here’s the thing. Who cares if we’re a bit late, and so what if we make the wrong choice? Perhaps what we need isn’t a ‘right’ answer, or cliched words of reassurance, but the belief that whatever happens, it’s not the end of the world.

Though it may seem paradoxical, if we want to overcome fear, we have to leave fear be. If we try something while also protecting ourselves against potential disappointment, this will produce entirely different results compared to if we accept our fear and do the thing

anyway. The former involves expending a huge amount of mental energy on avoiding fear, which prevents us from fulfilling our potential.

At school, we all perfected the art of fitting into standards and moulds, but we didn't have much chance to learn what to do when things fall apart. We do our best to stay upright in our rapidly changing world, but any day we might snap. Those of us who make it through to the end are the ones who can pick up the broken pieces and embrace them.

There is more than anxiety to be found in the unknown. Excitement, curiosity and wonder aren't found within the predictable. Only those of us who accept our fears and throw ourselves into the sea called life can enjoy its waves.

Perhaps the thing we should fear most is not the world, but the limits we set ourselves.

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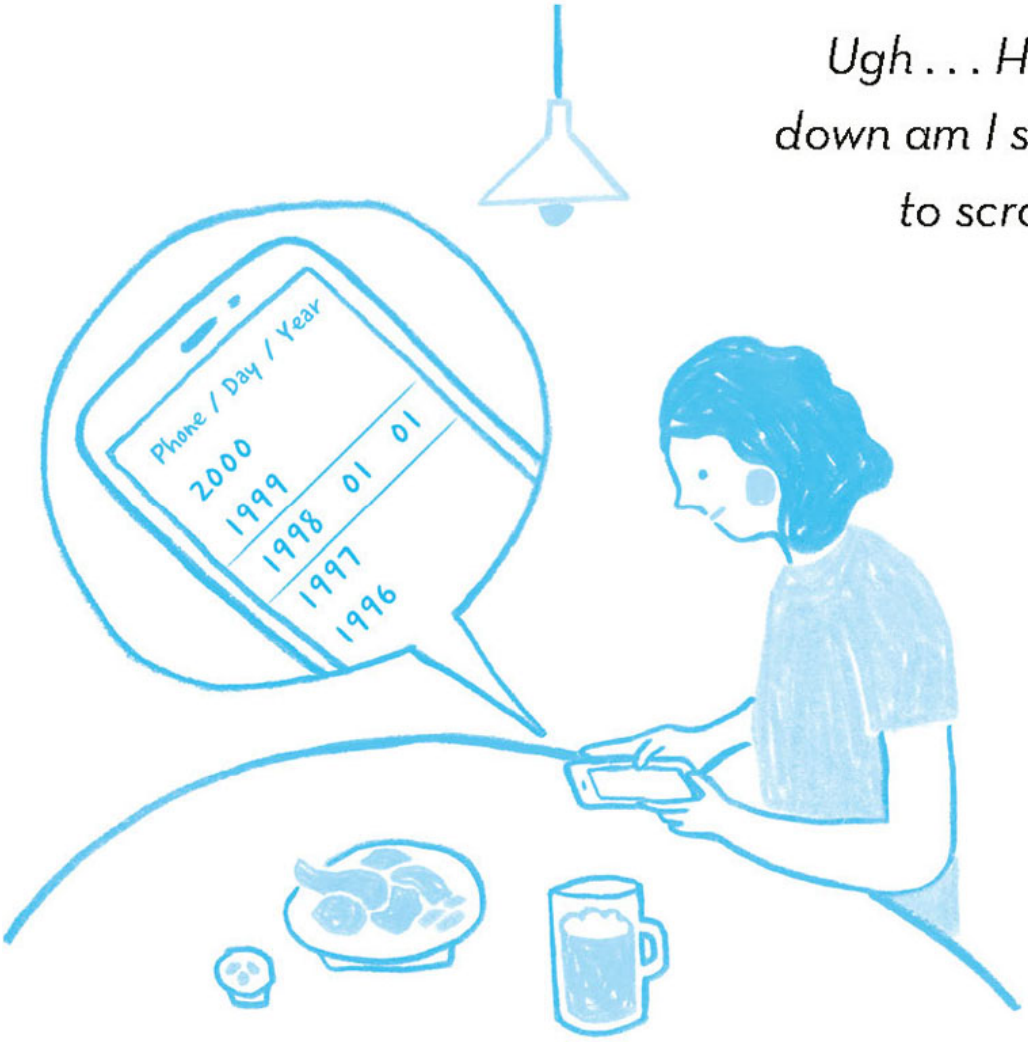
23
The Laws of Nature



Ugh . . . How far down am I supposed to scroll?

Why does getting old come so easy?

Friend, they're just
the laws of nature.

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MY LITTLE TIPS FOR RECHARGING AN EMPTY HEART

When My Empty Bank Account Has Me Sighing

I decided that if I was going to be broke, I might as well enjoy myself.

I decided to feel a little less guilty about spending money on myself

and to fully enjoy the moment.

This isn’t me churning out tired cliches about looking on the bright side.

We deserve to make life a little easier for ourselves.

IF WE'RE BROKE, WE MIGHT AS WELL BE HAPPY

If the sight of your bank balance brings you to tears, try shifting your perspective. If we're going to be broke no matter how hard we try to save, we might as well be happy! Though I always emphasise that we should never force ourselves to be happy, if the feeling is genuine, and comes from a place of ease, it's inevitably a good thing. We deserve to follow where our hearts lead us.

SETTING OUR OWN STANDARDS

That trip you keep umming and ahing about, that hobby you've always wanted to pick up – if you feel like it's now or never, dare yourself to go for it! If we practise spending money based on the standards we set for ourselves, we'll worry less when our bank balances run low. We'll naturally feel less burdened, and see the good sides of our situations. Money comes and money goes, but if we use it on something meaningful, it becomes something precious!

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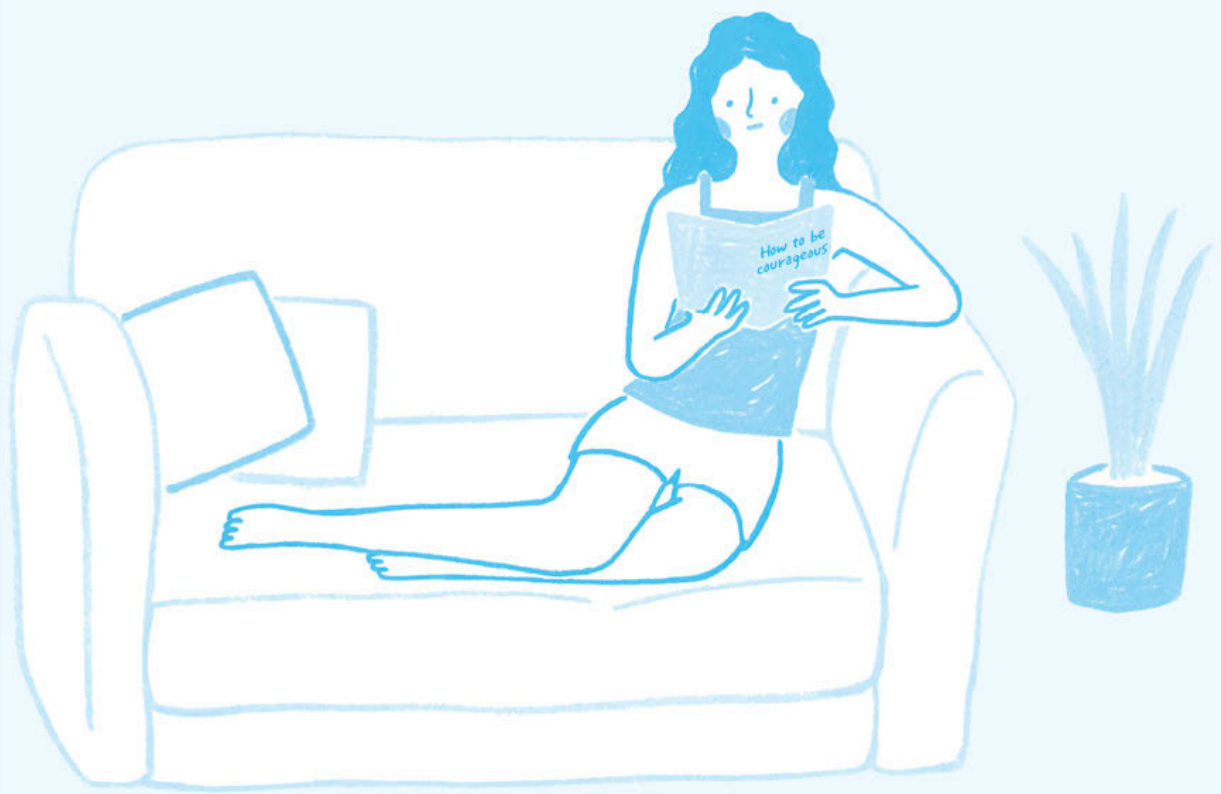
MY LITTLE TIPS FOR RECHARGING AN EMPTY HEART

When It Feels Like the Whole Universe Is Against Me



Even if we work up the courage to be hated, doesn’t make it easy.

The idea that someone could hate me is so horrible

that even though I know not everyone will like me, and that I won't like everyone, either,

sometimes it doesn’t help.

At times like these, let’s not overthink

and instead spend time with the people who love us.

FINDING OUR OWN WAY OF COPING

The ways of the mind are neither clear nor fixed – we thus struggle to understand what's going on in our own heads, let alone other people's. Trying to read minds always involves guesswork. So, when we feel anxious, let's spend time with the people who genuinely support us, who make us feel safe and who recharge our batteries. For some people, being alone helps. Try out a range of methods and come up with a coping strategy that works for you. Rather than overanalysing others' actions, try to believe that their default setting is to like and respect you.

THE REAL COURAGE TO BE HATED

No one likes to be hated. It's natural for us to want to get back what we put in. Don't worry too much if being disliked irks you. Real courage doesn't come from pretending we're unbothered, but from accepting that there are those who love us, and those who hate us.

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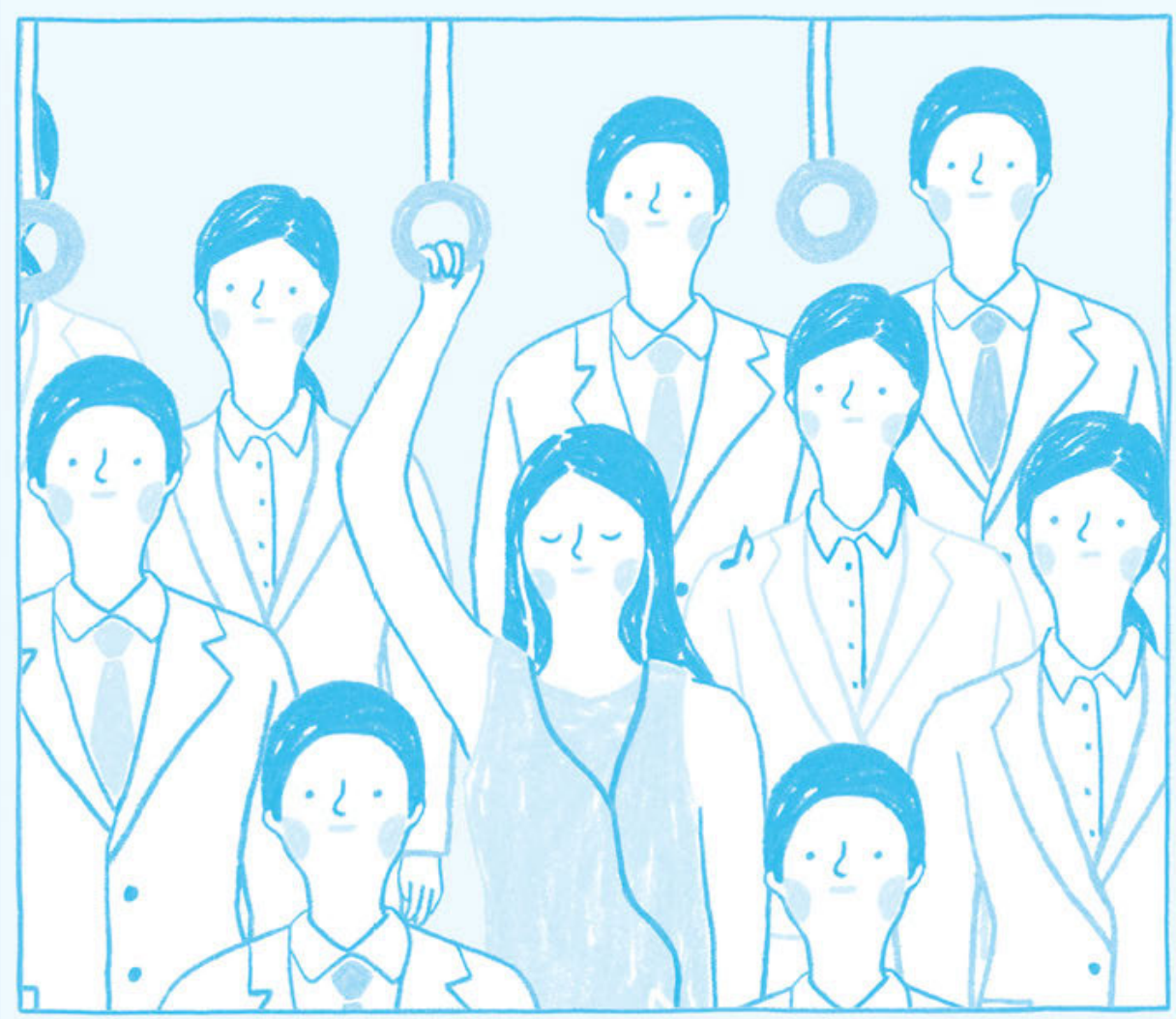
Spacing Out on the Hell Commute



I close my eyes and focus on the music.

I imagine I’m in the club.

In my head, I dance.

In this place, there’s nothing but me, the music and the handle.

I get off at my stop like nothing happened.

IMAGINATION COMES FOR FREE!

I've come up with two fun ways to survive the hell commute: observation and imagination. I might eavesdrop on the middle-aged women's small talk (they speak pretty loudly, so eavesdropping may not be the right word), or imagine what I'd say in an interview once I'm famous. Isn't it great that no matter where we are, we only need to close our eyes, and we can daydream for free?

MY OWN FUN-JUICER

Amidst the daily grind, when there's no fun to be found in anything, we can make our own amusement, like juicing a lemon! What is the fun-juicer that refreshes your soul after a long day spent in the cold city?

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PART 03

I WANT TO STAY AT HOME EVERY DAY

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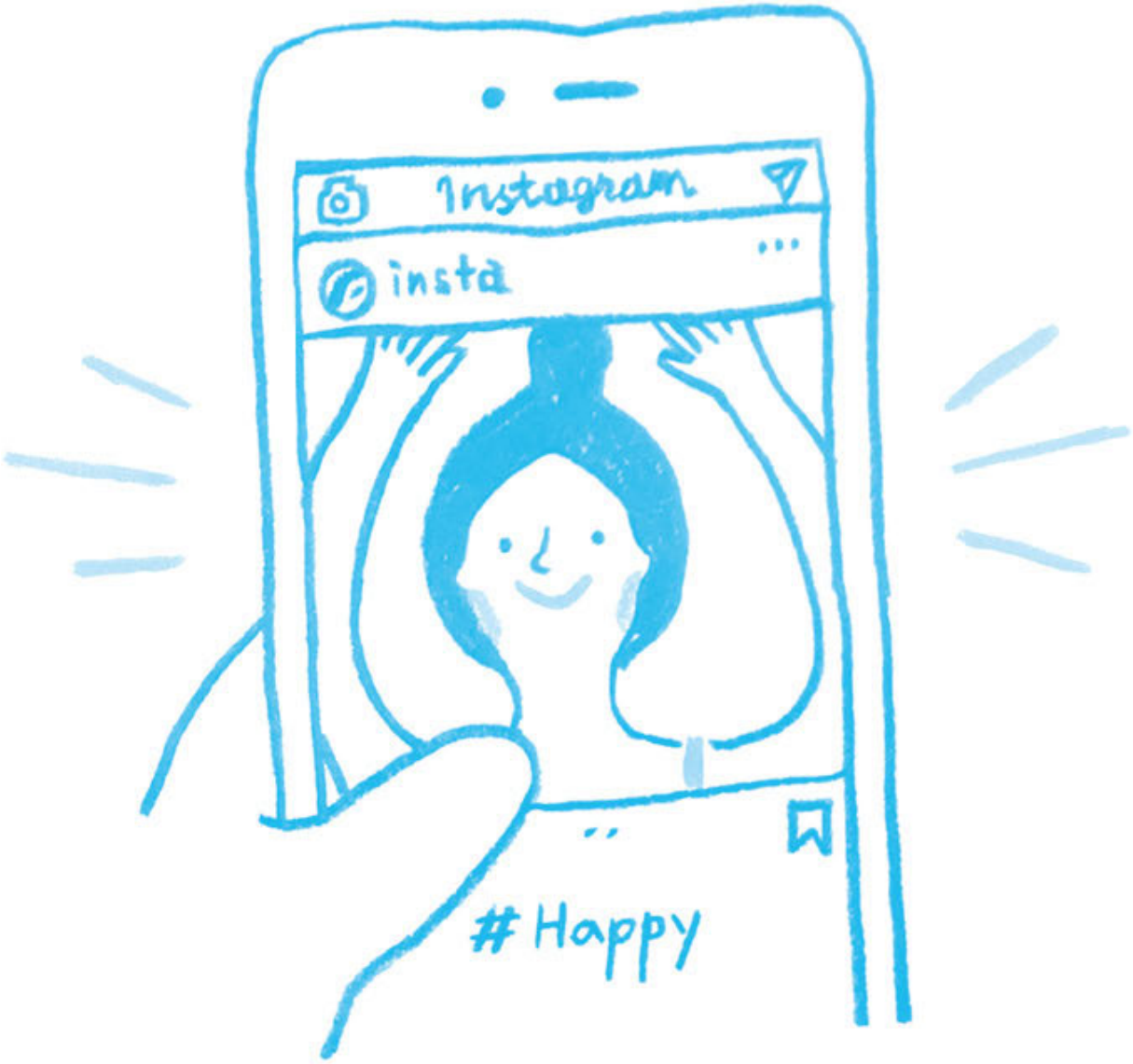
24
Sometimes I Don’t Feel Like Doing Anything

Nothing interests me.

Not delicious food.

Not comedy films.



On social media, I seem to be having a great time.

But in reality, I’m so bored.

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PROLONGED LASSITUDE

Just as how food doesn't always taste as good as it looks in the picture, some days, I looked so much happier on my social media account than I was in real life. Whenever this happened, I was overwhelmed by a feeling of emptiness. On days like this, nothing was enjoyable, everything was a hassle and it all felt pointless. Before anyone even noticed, the feeling of helplessness would be eating away at my everyday life. It was only once I'd made it out of that vast, scary swamp of lassitude that I realised just how exhausted I'd been.

It's said that nowadays mild depression and lassitude are as widespread as the common cold. After all, the average adult life is difficult to manage in itself, so it's easy to feel helpless. Mostly, we brush our feelings aside, blaming our situations. We hide it very well, too – we still function in society and don't act out in any serious way – and so those around us simply write us off as 'weak-willed' or 'inept'. Of course, with time, some people naturally recover, much like with the common cold, but if the feeling carries on and we continue to neglect ourselves, lassitude can become an integral part of who we are. What's worse is when we brand ourselves as 'lazy' and 'unmotivated'.

No one is born this way. Everyone has their own circumstances that lead them to this point. We ourselves know the reasons best, and are in the best position to console ourselves.

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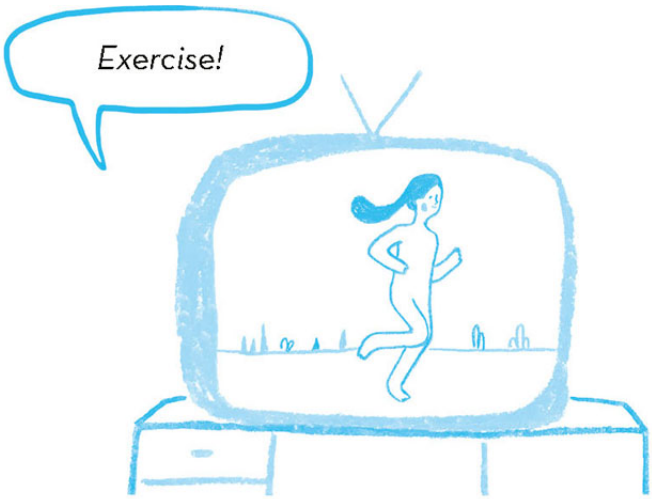
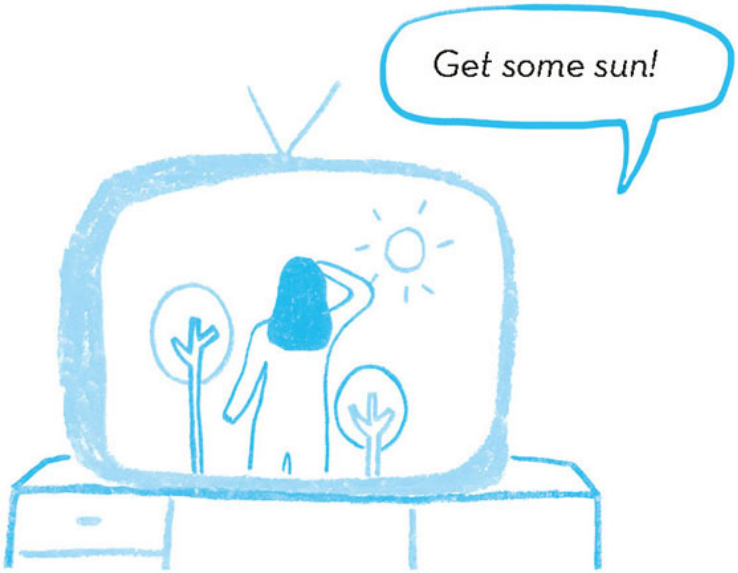
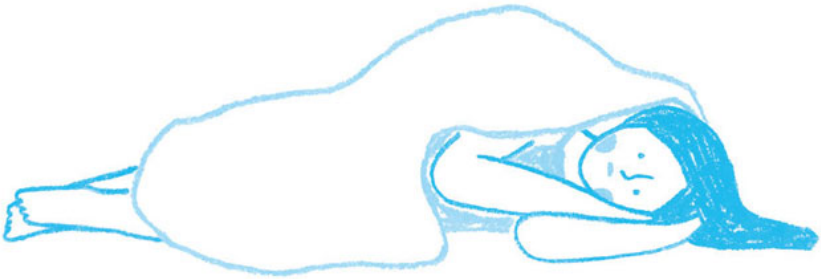
25
The Paradox of Overcoming Depression



I’m depressed, so I don’t have the energy to exercise.

I’m depressed, so I don’t have the energy to read a book.





I’m depressed, so I don’t have the energy to go outside.

It’s no good.

I’m doomed.

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CAN I GET BETTER?

A while back, I injured my right hand and was in a cast for two weeks. I was worried because it felt really uncomfortable, but after about half a day, I got used to it. The discomfort hadn't suddenly disappeared, though. It wasn't as if the pain had gone away, either. It's amazing how quickly our bodies become accustomed to pain, and how, once we're better, we forget all about how bad it felt at the time. As people, we quickly adjust to the situations and environments around us.

Much like with physical pain, we quickly adjust to emotional pain, too, and it's not long before we forget how we used to feel. Emotional pain becomes our default setting. Though, rationally, we know that sticking to a basic daily routine is important for overcoming depression, when we're depressed, this is really difficult. The treatment we're prescribed is the one thing we are unable to do. As a result, we chastise ourselves for not being able to recover on our own.

Because our emotions and thoughts are inter-connected with our physiology, depression has real effects on our bodies. Long-term depression and low energy levels make it hard to do the things that look easy most of the time. Although we would never think twice about going to the hospital and seeking the advice of an expert when we're physically unwell, when our minds are unwell, we mistakenly believe that we should get better by ourselves. If we're struggling mentally, we need to ask for help. It's important to get as much support as possible from those around us, and deal with the real-life problems at the root of our depression one by one.

Rather than any grand and obscure aims, it’s better to start with easily achievable concrete goals. Things like: ‘Read one page of a book every day for a week’, or ‘Walk for five minutes a day, three days a week’.

Performing these small actions give us a sense of accomplishment, allowing us to rebuild our self-confidence. It’s okay to go at our own pace. When we’re lying in bed at night, let’s make sure to compliment ourselves on doing our best.

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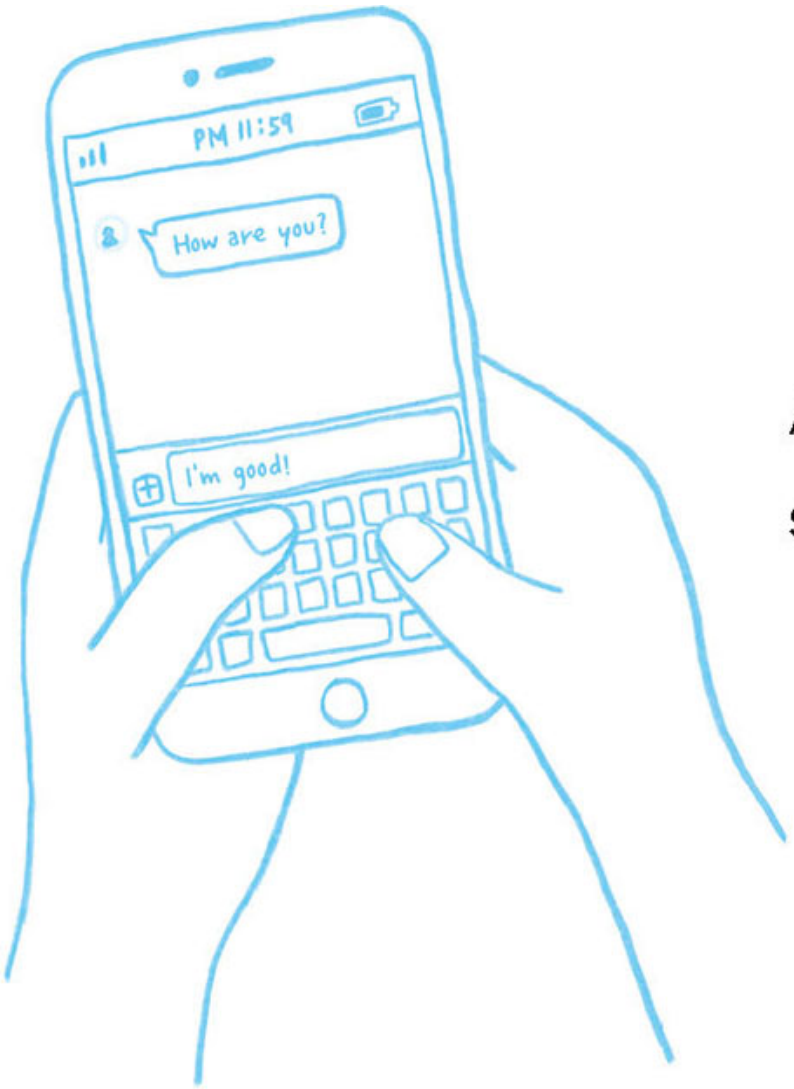
26
A Night Spent Scrolling Through My Contacts

I scroll down to the
end of my contacts

but there's no one I can
open up to.



And posting on social media

feels so pathetic.

‘You had it tough today.’

Some days, this is all I want to hear.

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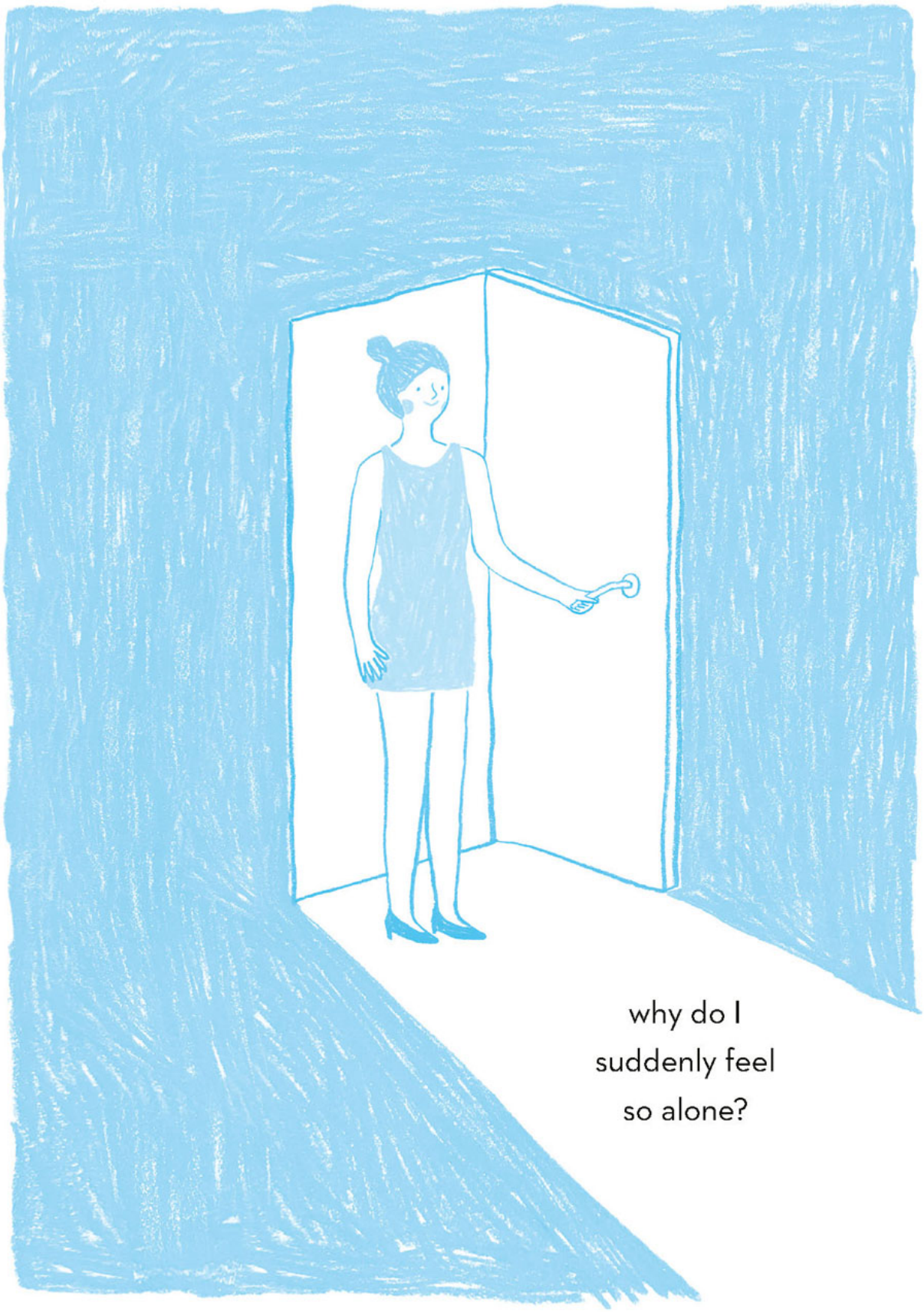
27
I Feel Alone Even When I’m Not

When I’m on the way home

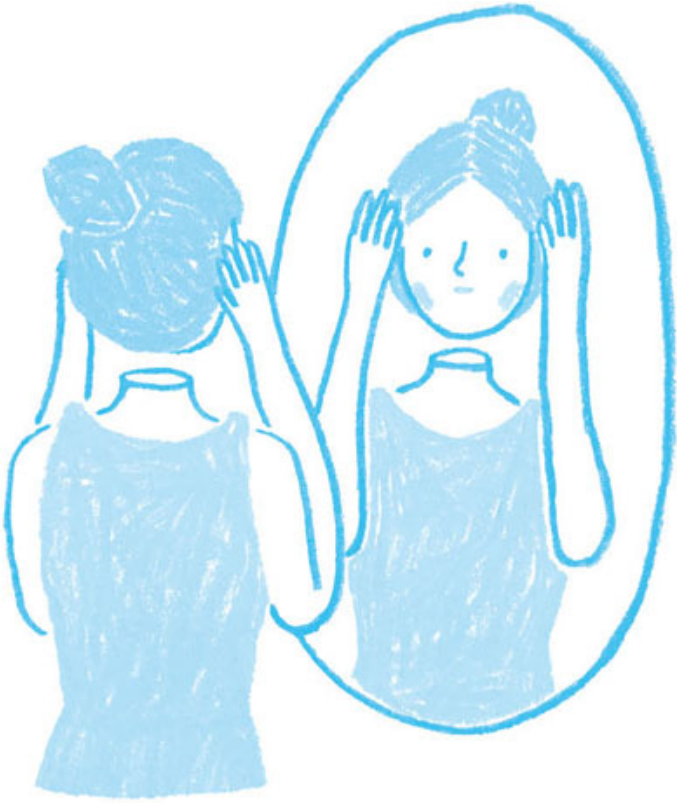
after meeting up with people,



why do I
suddenly feel
so alone?

Maybe I’m in a slump.

When I come home,
I'm exhausted



and don't want to do
anything anymore.

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I CANCELLED MY PLANS AGAIN TODAY

The lonelier I was, the harder it was to see people. On the way home after smiling and chatting with others, I would feel even more isolated. That sense of floating all alone despite being around people – it was unbearable. I would often cancel plans and go into hiding. Relative loneliness scared me far more than absolute loneliness.

No one person can share all their time with us. Using people to fill the void of loneliness can actually make us feel worse. Despite this, we continue our search for someone who'll always be at our side. Not because we want to be with someone, but because we can't bear to be alone.

Having someone there doesn't make the loneliness disappear. Only once we stop looking can we make room for someone: it is then that we'll be able to handle loneliness a little better.

Until that time comes, we need to face loneliness head-on and master the art of keeping ourselves company.

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28
Is It Okay to Live Like This?

Though my anxiety never goes away

I still do nothing.

Is it okay to live like this?

Is it really okay?

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I DON’ T WANT TO DO ANYTHING

Sometimes, though I’m doing nothing at all, I put off the things I’m supposed to do, which makes me feel so guilty. Over time, anxiety can become ingrained, and we remain in an anxious state even after the root cause is gone. We become addicted to anxiety. Those with perfectionist anxiety are particularly prone to develop this addiction and to suffer from low energy as a result. Achieving perfection consumes a lot of energy, so when we rest, we need to rest properly, but even then, we still feel anxious. Though our anxiety originally stemmed from wanting to do something well, in the end, it immobilises us.

One of the easiest – and absolute worst – things to do at times like these is to search social media for ‘people living their best lives’. By doing this, we pile negative thinking on top of our anxiety, and our spiralling thoughts lead out the door, beyond the mountains, down the river, to somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean.

This is my first attempt at this thing called life, and I’m making a mess of it – how do other people make it look so easy? Everyone else is living life to the fullest . . . I wish I could, but I don’t have the drive. When thoughts like these race through our minds, we need to take action to break free from anxiety addiction. But if taking action is tough, going for a walk to clear our heads is a good place to start. When we’re anxious, the thoughts that fill our minds are generally negative ones, so it helps to do something that gives us a reprieve from thinking, and time to rest.

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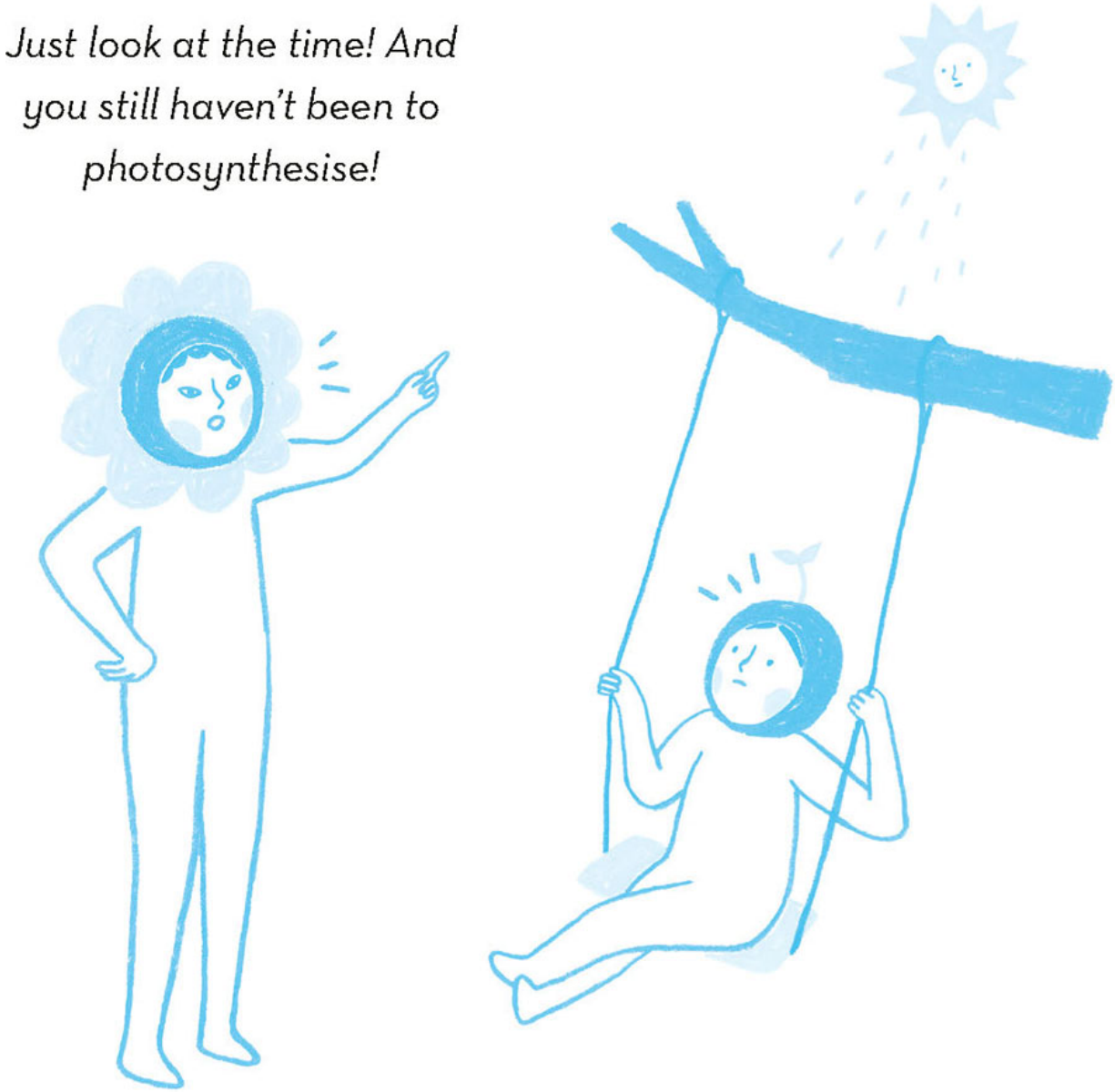
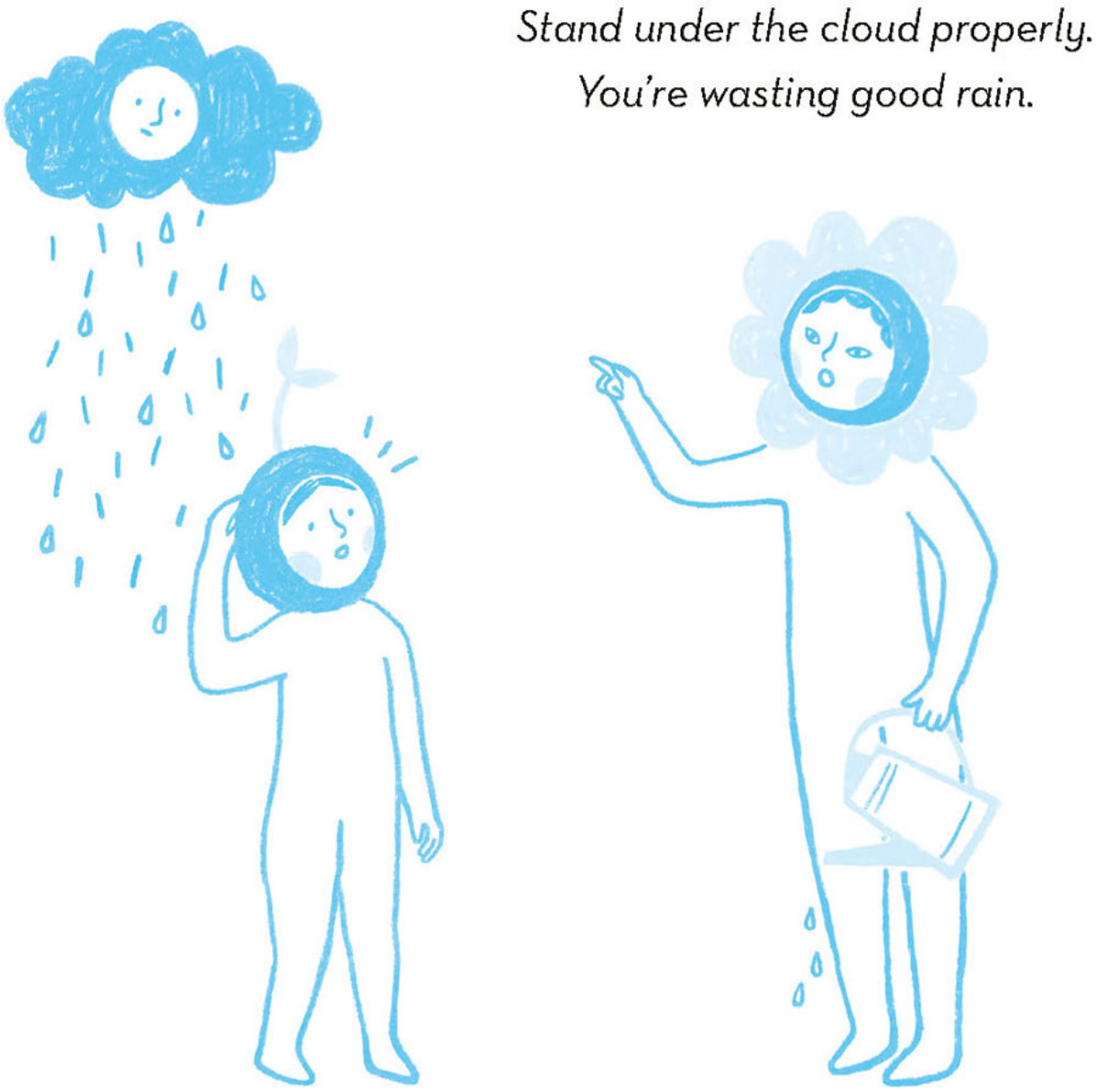
29
Someone Who Needs a Little More Time



I know you do it because you love me.



I know you just want what's best for me.

But please, let me off the hook every now and then.
Wait for me a while.

The thing is

maybe I need

a little more

time than other people.

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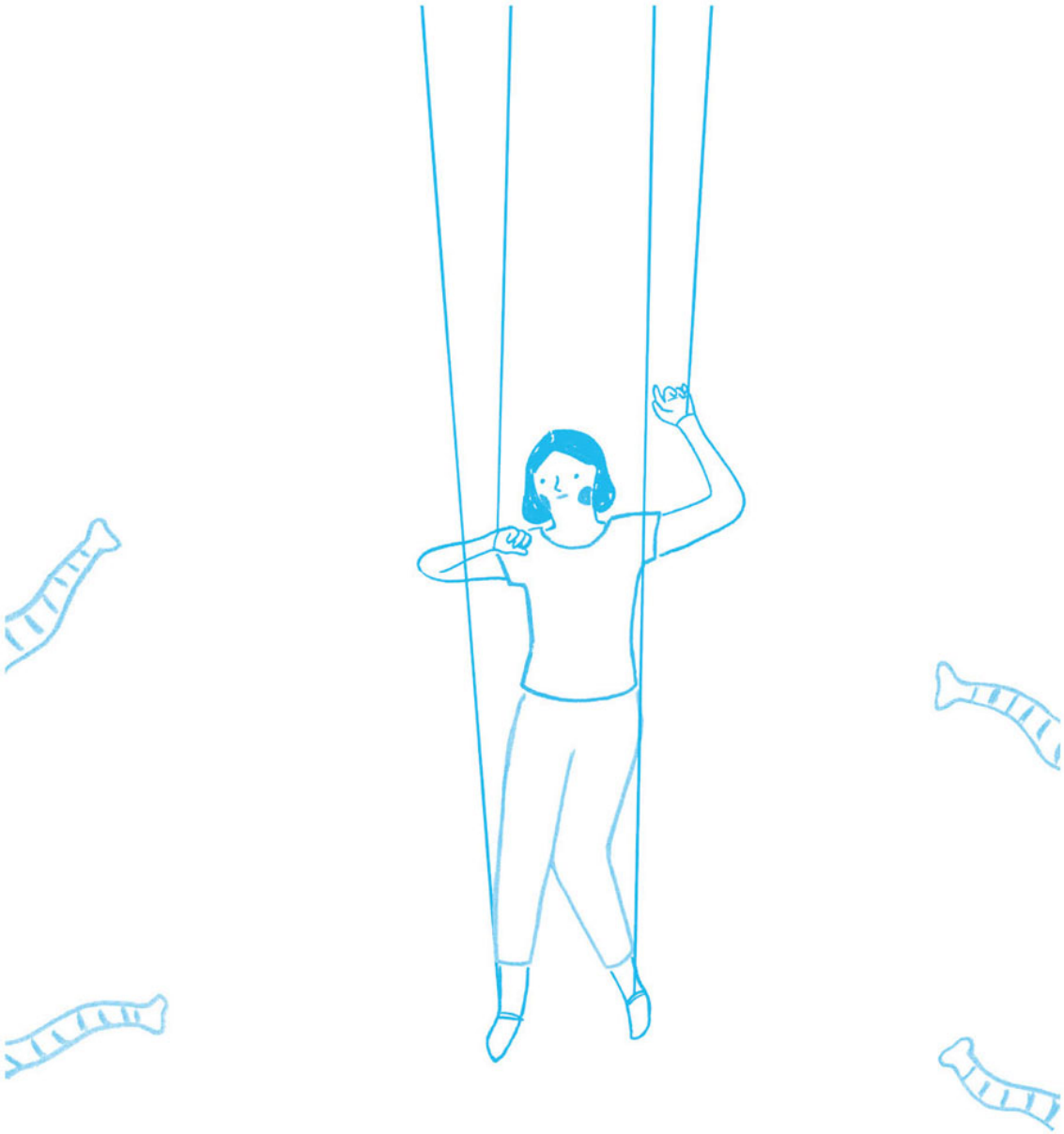
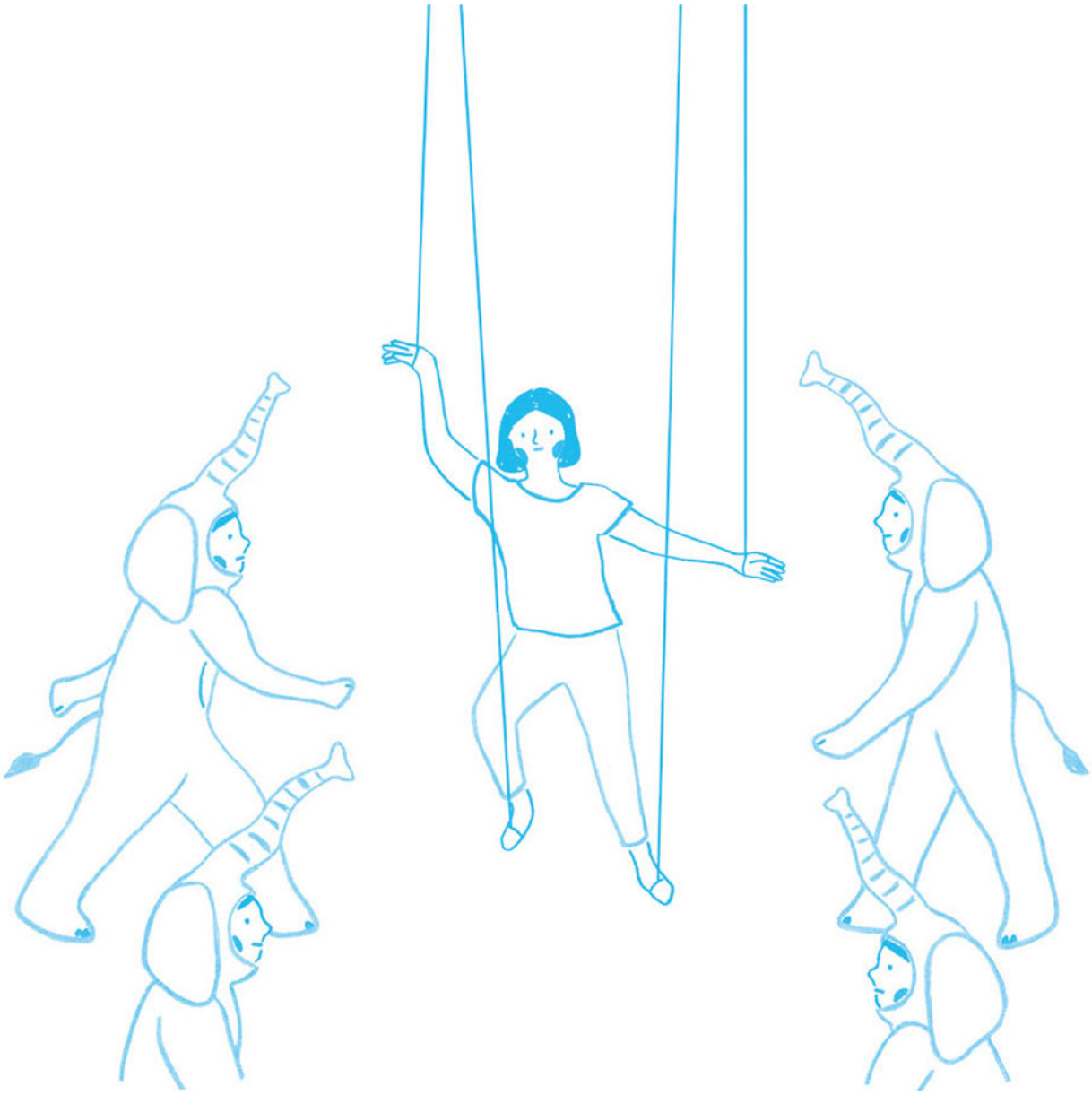
30
When We’re Sick and Tired of Situations We Can’t Control

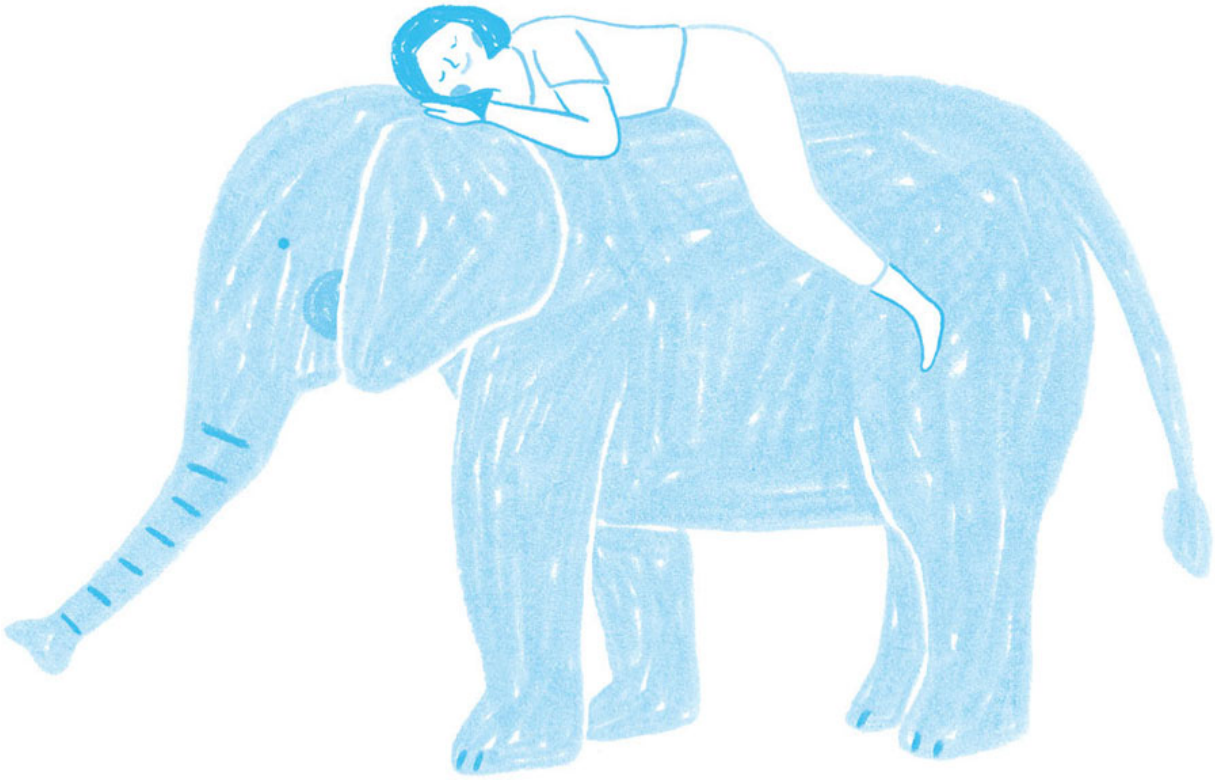


When situations beyond our control make us miserable



rather than trying to break free

it’s better to focus on what we can do right now.



This way, we stop reality from getting us down and find something to lean on.

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REST FOR A BE AT, THEN BACK TO FUN!

When a situation beyond our control makes us feel helpless, we seek out something more stimulating. We watch thrillers or disaster movies, we eat spicy food with extra hot sauce, or otherwise, we drink. And rather than spend time with the people who put us at ease, we get involved with people who do the exact opposite. It's difficult to concentrate on anything, and we spend noticeably less time on life's quiet pleasures such as reading. Soon, the feeling of low energy takes us hostage, and even the physical sensation of taking a shower can feel unfamiliar.

Once we've been feeling this way for a while, our bodies and minds grow tired, and even the stimulation of daily life adds to our exhaustion and stress. We are therefore left with less energy to spend on emotions and physical sensations, blunting our capacity to feel happiness, too. At these times, much like how we seek out thrillers and spicy food, our minds are drawn to chaos. Mental anguish is something we can actually feel, and thus, sadly, we choose to inflict more pain upon ourselves. So, the worse our energy levels get, the more we are sucked in to the same situations that caused our problems in the first place. What's ironic is that the act of trying to escape these situations creates more negative energy, and so the more effort we put in, the more helpless we feel.

When linguistics professor George Lakoff, author of *Don't Think of an Elephant*, taught his Introduction to Cognitive Science course, he gave his students the assignment 'Don't think of an elephant'. Not one of his students was successful. When we hear a particular word,

corresponding ‘frames’ are automatically activated in our brains, even if the word negates said frame.

If we want to limit certain behaviours in children, rather than encouraging restraint, it’s much easier to redirect their attention to something else that’s interesting. Adults are no different. Have you ever gone online to search something, but get distracted by all sorts of interesting-looking links, and end up completely forgetting what you were supposed to do in the first place? Try turning the situation on its head. When we face a situation beyond our control, rather than focusing on how to get out of it, let’s put our energy into the fun things we can and want to do in the present moment.

In this way, by using positive experiences to reawaken our dulled senses, we gradually increase our mental energy levels and can apply this energy to resolve the problems we’re facing. If you can’t stop thinking of the elephant, how about resting for a moment and finding a way to have *fun* with the elephant?

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31
People Drain My Energy

high-energy friend → we hype each other up → laughing drains my energy

chill friend → I can’t stand the silence and overcompensate → overcompensating drains my energy

meeting up one-to-one → we take turns speaking, so I talk a lot → talking drains my energy

group meetups → I have to keep working out when to jump in → reading the room drains my energy

meeting up with a stressful person → worried I'll make a mistake, I unconsciously censor myself → dealing with the person drains my energy

seeing a friend I can be myself around → we have the extremely depressing conversations that I can only have with them → being depressed drains my energy

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32
Homebody Skill: Max Level

The minute a homebody
steps out the door,

their Homebody Gauge
starts to drop.

What is a Homebody Gauge? At home, the level remains steady, and can be recharged by resting at home after going out. Otherwise, it quickly dries up.

When the level of spicy

or sweet things inside the body decreases, a similar phenomenon occurs.

If my internal homebody level drops,

I need to recharge again at home.

Watching US TV
shows with my laptop
laid sideways

A real homebody doesn’t need to set foot outside to have a fulfilling day spent daydreaming.

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IT’S DANGEROUS OUTSIDE THE DUVET

There was a time in my life when I was master of hanging out by myself. I went to cafes, watched films, drank, shopped, ate, and even worked solo. The only downside was that I never worked up the courage to go to BBQ restaurants that had menus for a ‘minimum of two people’.

It wasn’t that I had no desire for human interaction during that time. At the end of each day, I would come home and scroll through photos on social media, of people laughing and chattering in twos or threes, and would curl up in a ball. I thought I had a problem that kept me from fitting into the normal world.

But when I did socialise with people, instead of enjoying myself, I felt mentally drained. Even when I was with friends who I loved and could be myself around, it felt like hard work. So I believed it was easier to be alone. I rarely went out unless someone invited me, and was rarely the one to get in touch first and arrange plans. I hardly ever made phone calls: I mostly texted or used instant messenger. One evening, I suddenly realised, ‘Oh, I didn’t utter a single word to anyone today’. This might paint a pitiful scene, but I was pretty satisfied with my unremarkable life.

Homebodies recharge their mental energy by resting at home, while social butterflies get their energy from going out. Depending on our personalities, our concept of rest differs. When introverts are emotionally exhausted, socialising doesn’t feel like a break, but instead something to ‘get over and done with’. That doesn’t mean they don’t like hanging out with people, of course, but going into ‘socialising mode’ consumes a considerable amount of energy.

‘Aren’t you bored of just staying in?’ ‘It’s the weekend, what are you doing at home all day?’ Questions like these really confuse homebodies. *Fool! Do you truly not know how varied and delightful a day spent at home can be!*

If only people with different personalities were open to understanding one another. Even if no one seems to get us, don’t worry – this doesn’t make us ‘strange’. If we want to take good care of ourselves, we should recharge in the way most comfortable for us. When we’re the most true to who we are, we’re able to look out not only for ourselves, but the people we care about. As long as we explain our situation and how we’re feeling, the people who matter to us will wait.

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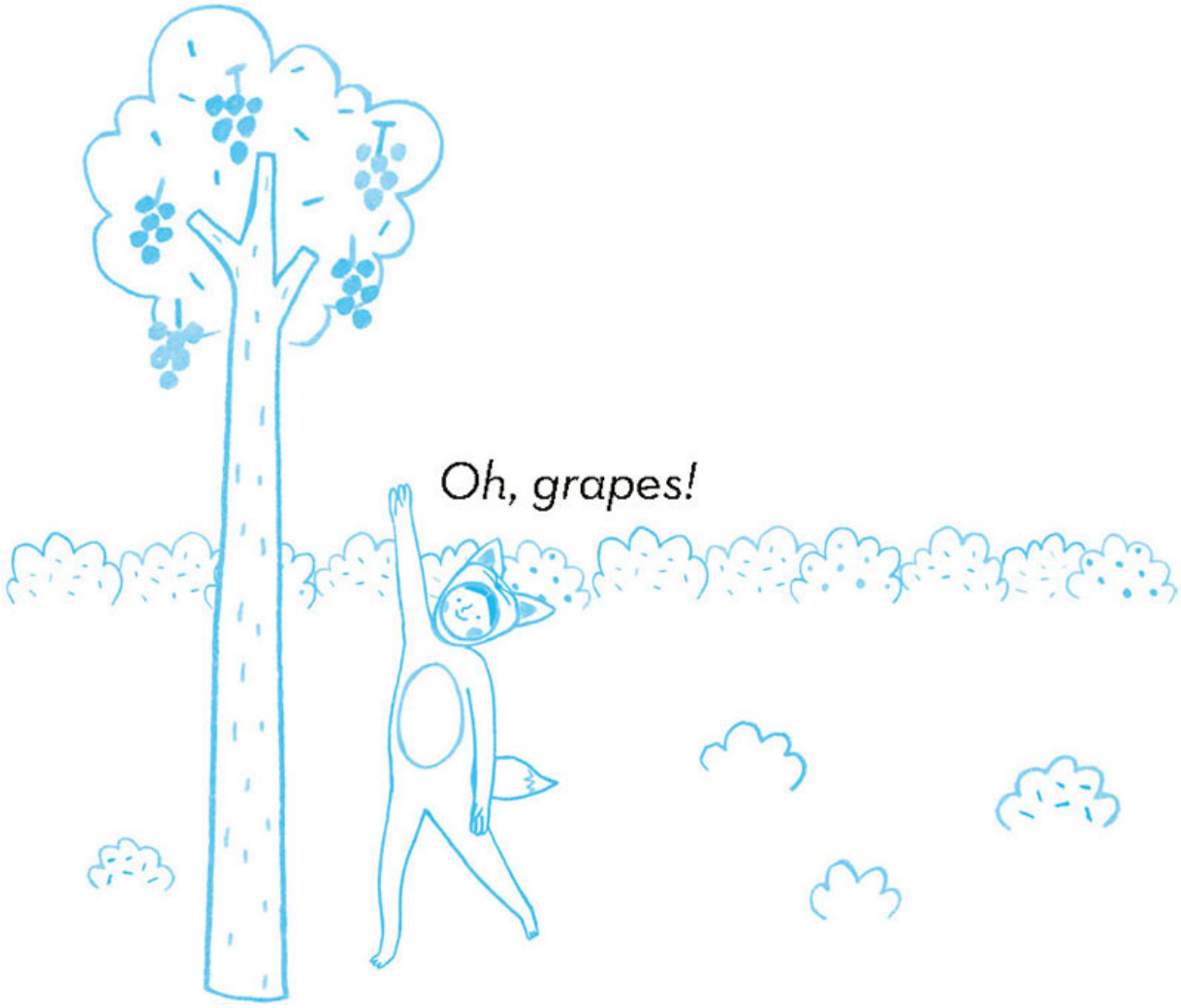
33
Does Hard Work Put Food on the Table?



The hardest thing is knowing that I've put in the work.

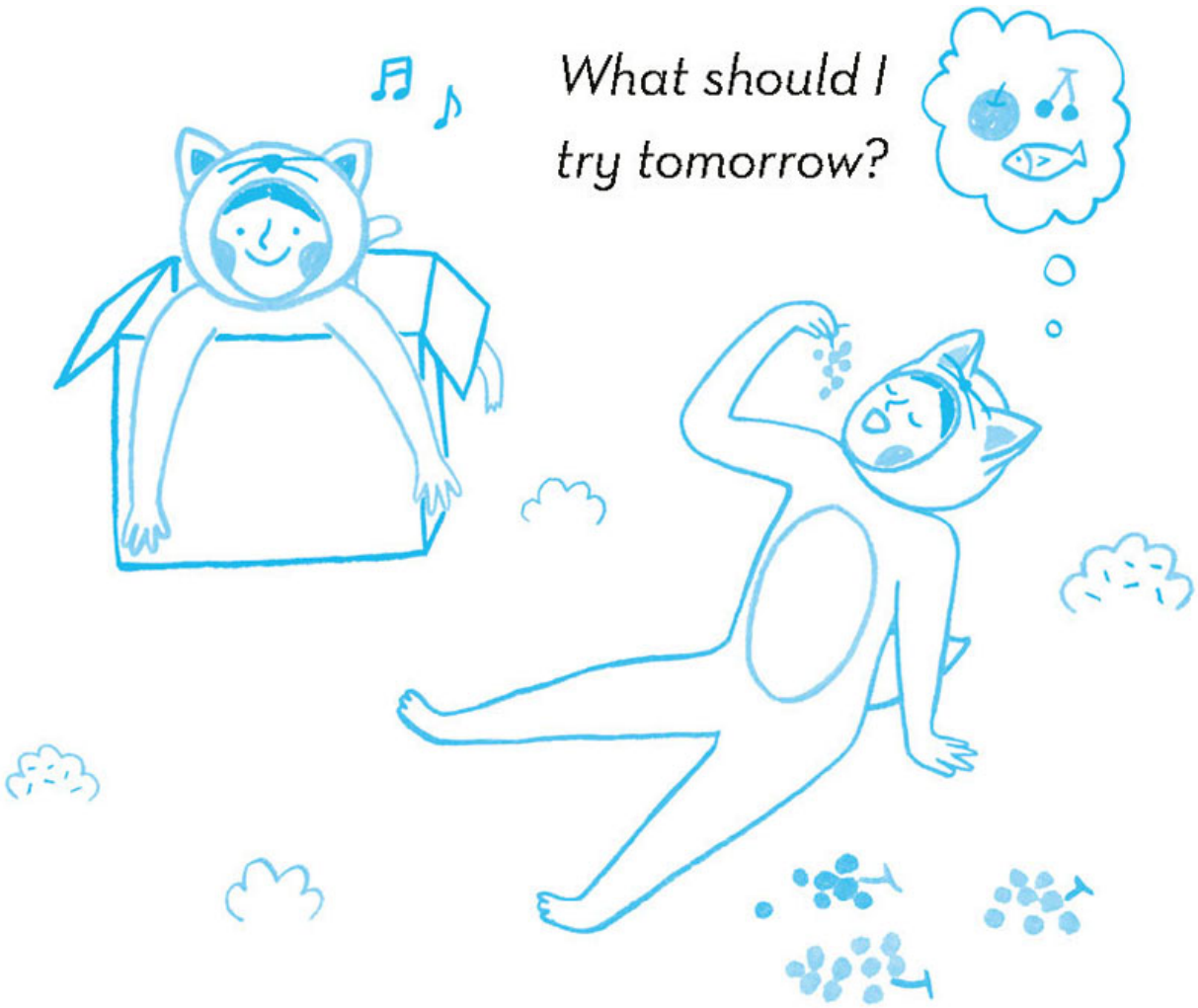
I have to accept that no matter how hard I try

there’s a limit to how far I can go.

And I don't feel like trying anymore.

That's enough . . . Giving up feels good . . .

But looking back, all that effort



gave me the strength to take the next step.

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GIVING UP FEELS GOOD

Sometimes, all the hard work in the world isn't enough to close the gap between reality and expectation. We feel so helpless that our minds and bodies go on 'pause'. It's not when we're physically tired, but when our efforts don't reap results that we get fed up. If we just stop trying instead, it's not as if something bad will happen, and that way we won't have to confront our limits, either.

Consistent overwork left almost no part of my body unscathed. I went to various hospitals, and each time I was given the same answer: 'It's stress-related, so don't put yourself under any strain. Rest up.' Inside, I'd be grumbling, *If I could rest, I wouldn't have come to the hospital to begin with, would I?* Then, as if they'd read my mind, the doctor would add, 'If you're walking and your feet start to hurt, what should you do?'

'Rest,' I'd reply.

'Exactly. You take a break before walking again. You can of course change into a more comfortable pair of shoes first. But you keep putting strain on your legs. When it comes down to it, what are you pushing yourself for?'

My mind went blank. Everyone works hard in order to be happy, but what was I striving for? Everything was back-to-front. Had I abused my mind and body, believing that if I stopped now, I'd be losing the battle against both myself and the world?

Society seems to view pushing ourselves beyond our limits as some incredible virtue. But are limits always something to be overcome? And what does 'overcoming' really mean? Achieving visible results? Not letting disappointment get us down, and instead

getting back up and trying again? Isn’t the real virtue knowing how to rest once we’ve reached our limits? Maybe knowing how to handle disappointment is one of the most important skills we can possess.

The hard work we’ve put in doesn’t go to waste, though. At some point, it will reappear in a different form – as wisdom – and help us. So, if we’ve already put in enough work, how about taking some rest and relaxation for now?

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Sleepless Nights Spent Worrying About What Might Never Happen

Worrying about the future keeps me up at night.

I go to sleep late and wake up late.

I’m tired and push today’s tasks to tomorrow.

I worry even more about the future.

An endless cycle.

SELF-COUNSELLING

On sleepless nights, thinking about *why* I can't sleep actually makes me feel calmer. Let's soothe ourselves with some 'self-counselling' – acting as our own therapists, and listening to the struggles of us, the clients.

SEEING THE PROBLEM OBJECTIVELY

Oh, I guess something's bothering me. *Huh, looks like I'm worried about that thing*. Try writing these thoughts down and considering them objectively. Being concerned about the future means that we want things to go well. Rather than fretting too much about our anxiety or trying to reduce it, simply acknowledge it and accept that it exists.

BEWARE THE EARLY HOURS

It's much easier to get emotional in the middle of the night, and so it's important to cut short the anxious thoughts before they spiral into excessive and unfounded worries.

MY LITTLE TIPS FOR RECHARGING AN EMPTY HEART

When Self-confidence Hits Rock Bottom

STRENGTHENING OUR MIND MUSCLES

When our depression gets bad, it's easy for us to erase the fun times from our memories. We are quick to re-edit our memories in a negative light, almost as if we've decided to be depressed. It takes time for altered thinking patterns to seep into our

minds and bodies and cover over our original thoughts and habits. Remember that the mind is a muscle, and it's only through regular exercise that we can strengthen it and change our rigid patterns of thinking.

COMPLIMENT THE LITTLE THINGS

When we're feeling down and our self-confidence is low, let's compliment ourselves for the little things. If we're not careful, unwanted comparisons and interference from others disguised as concern can easily lead us to adopt a negative self-image. So let's practise finding ways to compliment ourselves no matter what situations we find ourselves in.

MEMORY IS ALSO A CHOICE

We can't control life to stop bad things from ever happening, but we can choose to *remember* the good things instead. Let's remember more of the good things, and more often.

MY LITTLE TIPS FOR RECHARGING AN EMPTY HEART

When I'm Harassed by Spiralling Thoughts

If there’s something that’s really bothering me right now,

I'll create something that'll bother me even more.

Memories can't be erased.

They're simply covered over.

MAKING USE OF AN AGITATED MIND

Time generally heals all. Even so, the waiting is really hard, so while we're forgetting the pain, let's use some tricks to paint over with new memories. When something is bothering us, diverting our thoughts and energy by coming up with something that'll bother us even more might seem ridiculous. This can, however, be a really effective tool for those of us who tend to get too fixated on one particular thought. If we can take an agitated mind and redirect our thoughts in a productive direction, isn't that a pretty good thing?

COMING UP WITH OUR OWN LITTLE TRICKS

When an agitated mind stops us from concentrating, one technique is to clean our rooms, tidy up our desks, or geek out on a hobby. Let's try coming up with our own little tricks to help organise our minds.

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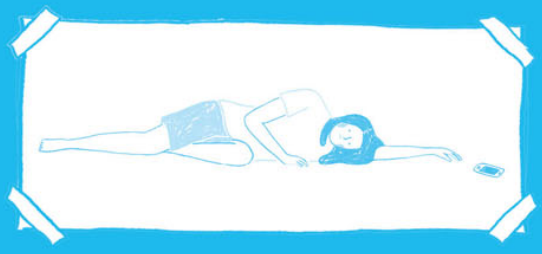
PART 04

IT'S EXTREMELY NORMAL TO NOT WANT TO



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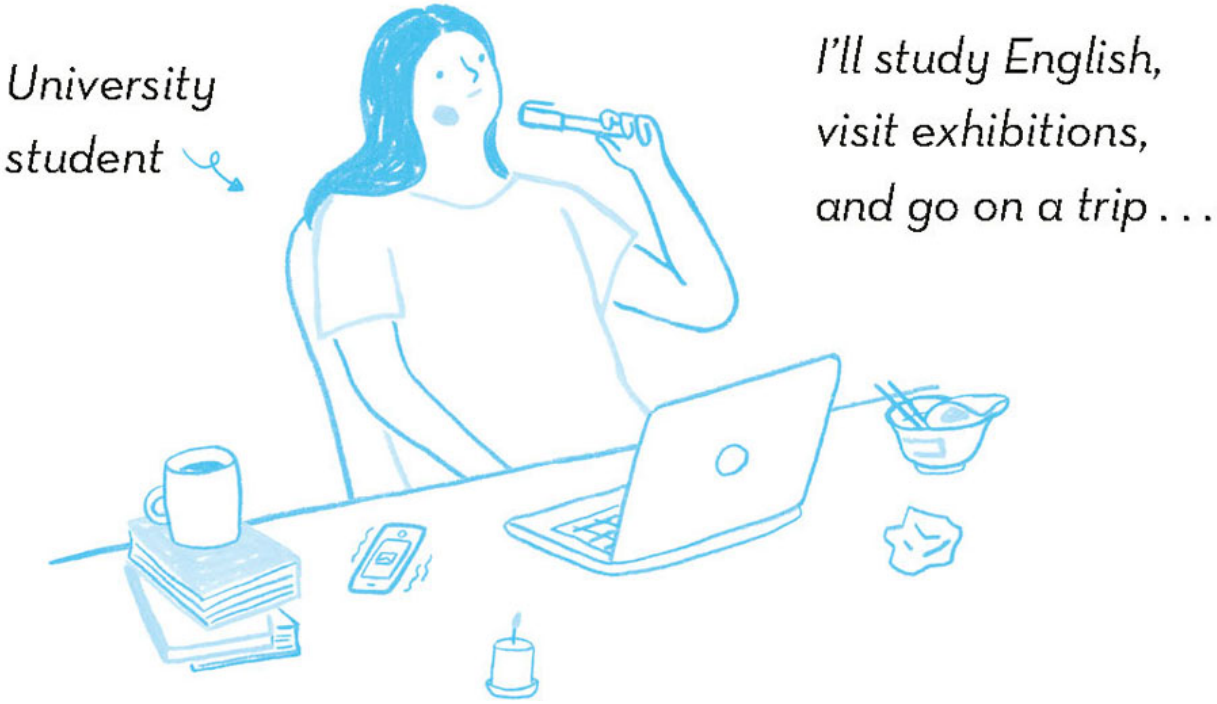
34
When the Busyness Stops, I Feel Empty

But once the exam is finally over . . .

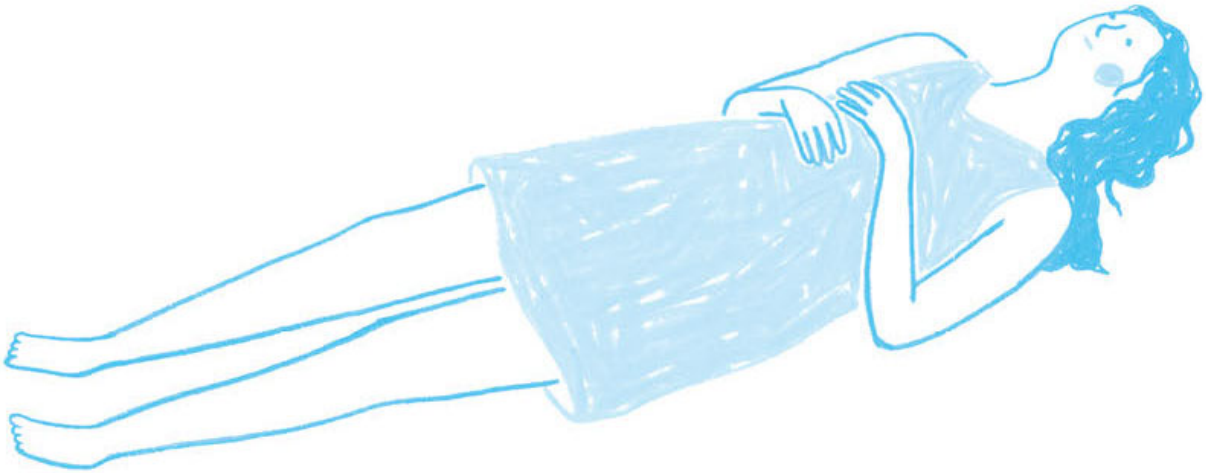
I do nothing.



But once I've finally finished my assignment . . .

I do nothing.

But once the project is finally over . . .



I do nothing.

Once I've finally finished this lot . . .

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THE MAGIC OF A DEADLINE

If there's one truth I've realised of late, it's that no matter how much I prepare ahead of time, there's a 500% chance I'll pull an all-nighter the day before a piece of work is due. My biological clock operates around deadlines. Though I may look like a trainwreck, somewhere inside I feel strangely reassured, thinking to myself, *Wow, just look at how hard I'm working!* The superpowers I feel right before a deadline fill me with a confidence that rises up from my gut. Books I want to read, films I want to watch . . . There's a mountain of things I want to do. I feel an earth-shattering zeal, and ride that momentum as I come up with my plans for what I'll do after (I'd be better off using this time to finish my work, but anyway). Then, once the whirlwind of busyness has died down, the emptiness follows. I'm bored, but I don't feel like doing anything practical or worthwhile. At the same time, the idea of slacking off makes me feel anxious and on edge. So, for a while, I anxiously do nothing. When I didn't have the time on my hands, I wanted it so much, but when I finally have it, it always slips listlessly through my fingers. Why do we always long for what we don't have?

If we treat life's tasks only as something to 'achieve' and to get over and done with, it's difficult to get the most out of life, no matter how passionate we may be. Rather than doing things of our own choosing, it's the task that's controlling us, and once it's over, to compensate, we feel like making the choice to be lazy.

Of course, it's difficult to approach every task like it matters to us, but if we look out for opportunities, there'll be times where we can make the task our own. If nothing else, rather than wait for what we're doing to be over, let's live in the moment. As soon as this thing

is over, the next one will come along, so we need to know how to insert fun into the in-between moments while we wait. I believe that the more we do this, the more resilient we'll become, and we'll be a little less fazed when the feeling of emptiness rises up once more.

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35
What If I Make the Wrong Choice?

To make a slightly better choice,

I examine every single option closely.

But because no one can predict the future

Delivery for you!

there's no such thing as the 'best choice'.

We simply have a choice, and loving that choice is the only choice we have.

Whatever choice we make, as much as there’s something to gain, there’s something to lose, so we’ll have regrets either way.

Sometimes we just need to follow our hearts.

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THERE’S NO SUCH THING AS THE BEST CHOICE

Some decisions don’t get any easier with age. Choosing is difficult because, usually, we already know the answer. We know which route we should take, but we hold back, not wanting to take on the associated risks. When it comes down to it, however, nothing we choose will ever be the best choice. Why? Because ultimately it is our decision how we respond to the outcome of the choices we make. There’s no such thing as the ‘better’ or the ‘wrong’ choice. After all, we are best-placed to know what’s best for us. Whatever choice we make, we have our reasons for doing so.

Perhaps what we really seek isn’t the ‘best choice’, but the freedom to make a different choice whenever we want. Much like Schrödinger’s cat, no one can exist in two states at the same time. It’s our decision whether we yearn after the paths we didn’t choose, or instead whether we find happiness in the choices we’ve made. Perhaps sometimes the best thing is not to overthink, but instead to follow where our hearts take us, and then to embrace our choices.

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36
Do I Always Have to Think Positively?

Sometimes it’s a struggle to always think positively.

When our hearts plummet through the earth, deep underground,

there’s no need to force ourselves to look on the bright side.

It’s okay.

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WHEN THINKING POSITIVE LY IS HARD

‘You need to think positively!’

I don’t like remarks that force hope on us like this. Though the words may be well-intentioned, saying this to someone who’s struggling to cope as it is can be an act of violence. ‘Why not look on the bright side?’, ‘You’re just not trying hard enough!’ Comments like these may trigger a sense of defeat in the listener: *Why can’t I see things in a positive light?*

Sometimes thinking positively seems impossible, and that’s okay. Rather than casting aside our existing ways of thinking to suddenly adopt an extremely optimistic attitude, it’s okay to look at the situation and accept that ‘it is what it is’. Trying to hide something can actually make it more obvious. And so, the more we try to bury the negative thoughts, the more they swim to the surface. Instead, it’s better to think like so: *I have some negative ways of thinking. But I can also think in other ways, too*.

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37
I Hate Being Me

The easiest way to change our personalities

is to open up our hearts to new things, without denying or erasing who we are.

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BECOMING A NEW ‘ME’

I really hated my personality – how I always came across as gloomy – and so, I was constantly searching for ways to change myself. After I read a book on ‘how to become the new you, fast’, every morning I would look in the mirror and shout out phrases that promised to make me a sunnier and more energetic person (the book specified to say them loudly).

‘Every day I’m growing!’

‘Every day I’m becoming a new person!’

I would make these declarations, but nothing changed. Not seeing any immediate results, I gave up and leant into another method. But filling my head with all these ideas widened the gap between reality and what I knew, which only confused me.

‘Every day I’m becoming a new person!’

Though at first glance this sentence might seem positive, behind it lay a hidden meaning: ‘I don’t like who I am now, so I’m going to change myself.’ I’d fallen into the trap, and after all my misguided hard work, I was left feeling despondent, time and time again. As a result, I internalised a dangerous belief.

‘I’m incapable of change.’

Plenty of psychologists and psychiatrists alike argue that we can’t alter the personalities we’re born with. Even so, there’s no need to despair at our genes or environments: changing our personalities is instead something akin to ‘broadening our ways of thinking’. Drastic changes are always daunting, but it’s worth trying little additions. For example, if you’ve always liked apples, try an orange. And if you’re not keen on oranges, try something else. What’s important is that we’re not trying to erase or deny ourselves as we are now. Instead,

we’re adding the new aspects that we need. This takes time. Just as habits don’t change overnight, neither do our systems of thinking. This is a marathon that our past and present selves are running, and will continue to run as we continue to grow.

The efforts I made during that time were all to project a false image, one that denied who I really was. Naturally, with every attempt I quickly grew tired and lost motivation. I’m still not happy with every aspect of myself, but I no longer engage in unrealistic optimism or absolute positivity. Instead, I meet myself halfway: *I’m fine as I am, but it’s good to try out new things, too*.

Becoming a new person isn’t about striving more or being more diligent, but about having the courage to be open to new things.

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38
Wow, the Cup Is Half Empty!

There are moments when we need emptiness, not fullness.

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MOMENTS WHEN WE NEED EMPTINESS

‘Wow, the cup is half full!’

‘Huh, the cup is half empty.’

This is the often-used metaphor when talking about being satisfied with what we have. We’ve learnt that we need to be content when the cup is half full. Or otherwise, we’re told to be ‘rich at heart’, and that half is good enough.

There’s a weakness to this metaphor, however. Saying that we need to be happy with half a cup of water assumes that only ‘fullness’ can satisfy. Why do we only see the ‘filled’ part as positive? Can we not also affirm the ‘empty’ part? How can the metaphor claim that only fullness is positive, while also telling us to be satisfied when the empty 50% is right in front of our eyes?

Let’s turn the image on its head. If we were someone who needed an empty cup, we’d think like this: ‘The cup is half empty, yay!’ or ‘Huh, the cup is only half empty, that’s a shame.’ In this case, being ‘empty’ becomes something positive, and someone who needs an empty cup might be disappointed that there’s any water left at all. What if someone wants to put flowers in the cup? Perhaps to them, the cup contains the perfect volume of water. What’s important here isn’t whether or not we know how to look on the bright side. Instead, it’s that we don’t define what’s ‘positive’ according to ‘fullness’ or ‘emptiness’. Rather than always looking for the silver lining even in unsatisfactory situations, we need to broaden our definition of ‘positive’. People gain a sense of satisfaction from all different things, depending on their circumstances and points of view. None of us share a fingerprint, so how could our happiness all manifest in the same way?

Therefore, by saying that we should be happy with half a cup of water, we are perhaps limiting our view of ‘positivity’, arguing that only when something is full will satisfaction be within reach. Sometimes what we need is emptiness.

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39

No Matter How Hard I Try, I Can’t See the End

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YOU ARE A LOTUS FLOWER

Lotus flowers take time to reach full bloom.
About 100 days —
Fifty to get 90% of the way there,
and another fifty for the remaining 10%.

When the end doesn't seem in sight.
When you've worked hard for so long, but see no change.

Remember the lotus flower.

Though, on the outside, you might not appear to be moving,
you are a lotus flower, struggling on until that last 10% blooms.
You are a lotus flower, still blooming, even if it's happening beneath the surface.

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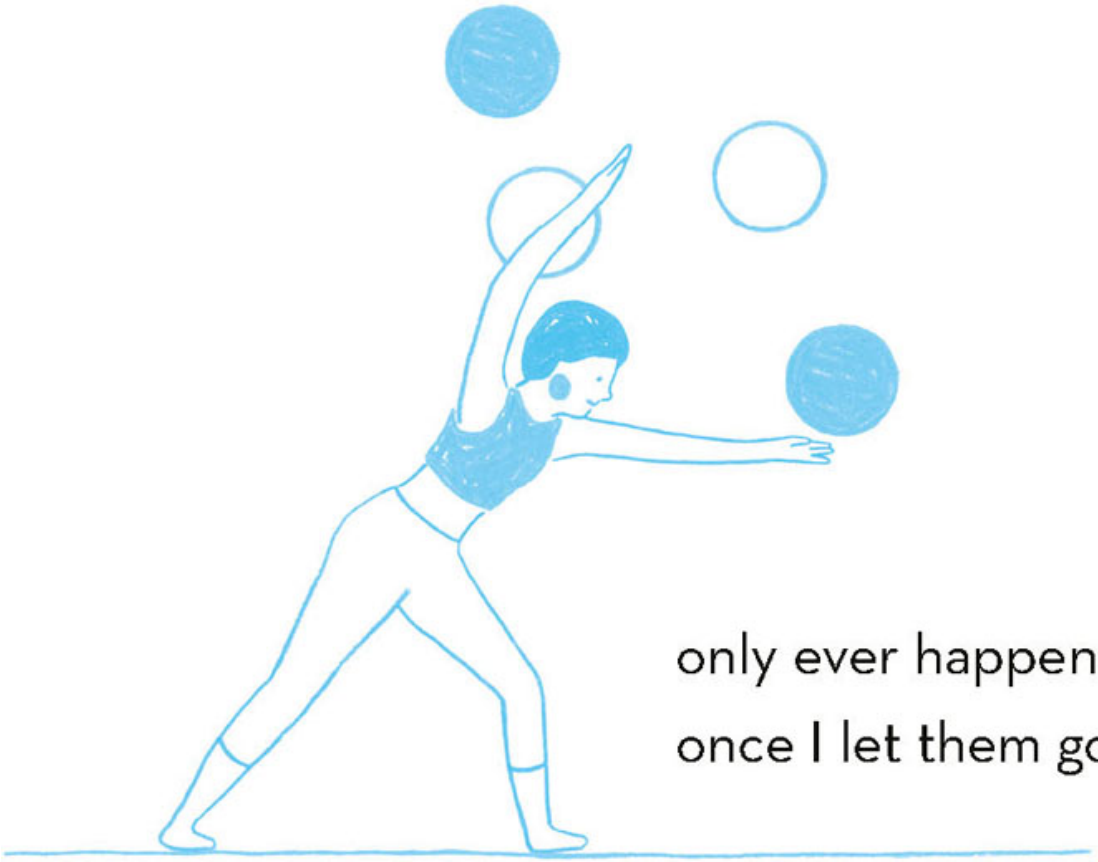
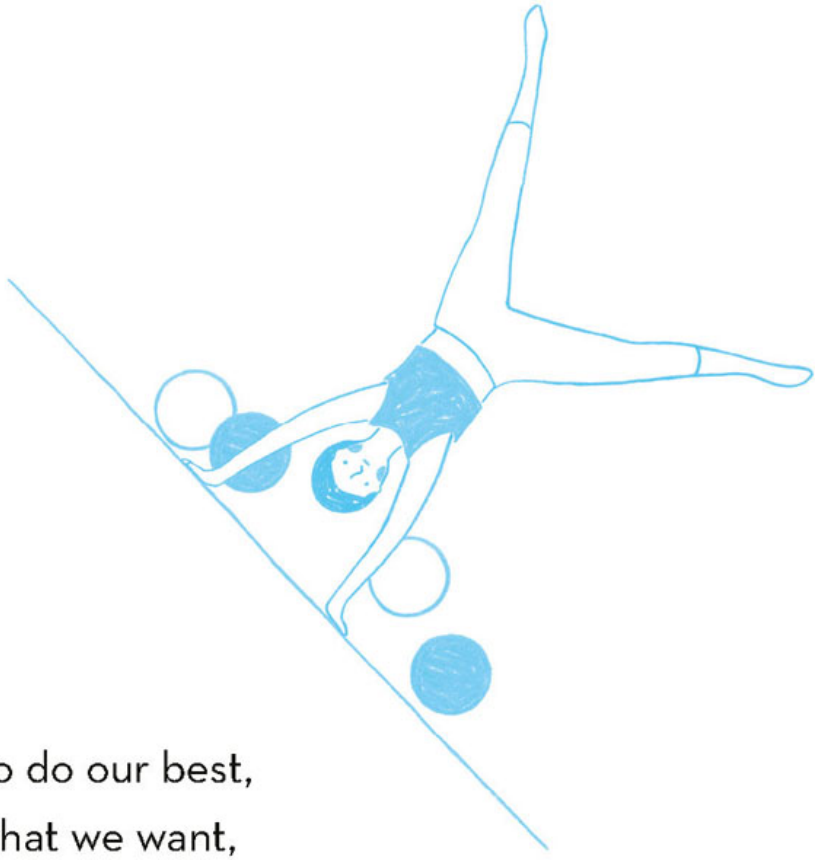
40
I Just Want to Give Up on It All



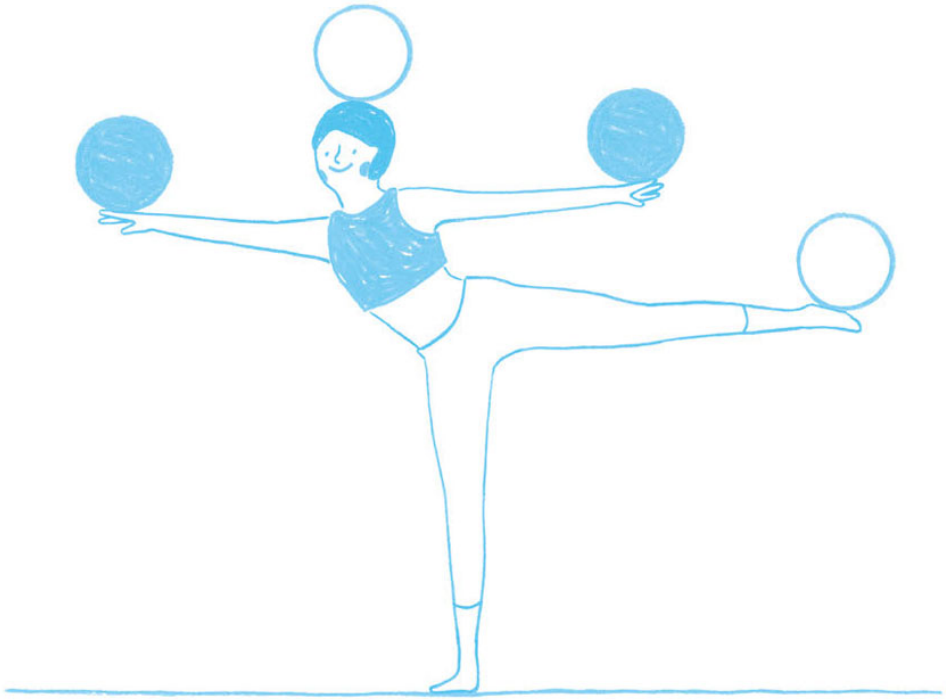
only ever happened
once I let them go.

Letting something
go isn't the same
as giving up.



We need to do our best,
go after what we want,

and leave life to
do the rest.



So that everything can find its rightful place.

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THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GIVING UP AND LETTING GO

Student life was tough, my major wasn't right for me, and so I took a break from university. I was working in an office as a temp. I had no money, no friends, and I wasn't getting along with my family – everything felt like a mess. After work, I would lock myself away in my room and lie in bed. It was around this time that a member of a religious cult approached me on the street and asked me to fill in a questionnaire. I even bought her a coffee and listened to what she had to say for quite a while. She said they had the answer to all my life's problems, and I was this close to following her to their 'headquarters' and participating in their ancestral rites ceremony. Thankfully, I later found out and cut ties with her, but wondered how on Earth I'd managed to be fooled by something like that. I guess I'd been in such a desperate state that I was about ready to try anything.

When my life began to diverge little by little from the one I'd dreamt of, everything started to feel meaningless. Despair led to more despair, and I felt like giving up on it all. Wise people say that we only get the things we want once we let them go, but I wasn't sure what exactly 'letting go' meant.

In *Life Is About Believing in Ourselves*, cartoonist Lee Hyun-se says:

> *If to give up is to wash one's hands of something, then to accept one's fate is to open up another path and move forward. [. . .] Someone who grumbles about their lot and maintains a nihilistic attitude without taking action is completely different from someone who confidently accepts their destiny. The former thinks, 'If this is my fate, what am I supposed to do? I'll just go with it', while the latter believes, 'This is my*

fate, and so I'll accept what I can't change, and look for what I can.' This is the stance of overcoming one's fate.[2]

There's nothing spiritual or magical about saying that things will only come true once we let them go. Instead, we're acknowledging that if we can't change something right away, we need to let go of our determination for a while, and focus on what we *can* do. Time flies when we're having fun, right? If we start by focusing on what we can do, we'll feel a small sense of accomplishment. With this, time will go by faster, and with it, the trying times will pass too. Whenever we feel like the world is spinning the wrong way, we can try looking at it from a different angle. The little positives build up and have a domino effect, drawing us closer to the things we once gave up on.

The opposite to doing everything according to plan isn't giving up, but letting go and allowing things to take their course.

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2 Lee Hyun-se, *Life Is About Believing in Ourselves*, Tornado Books, 2014

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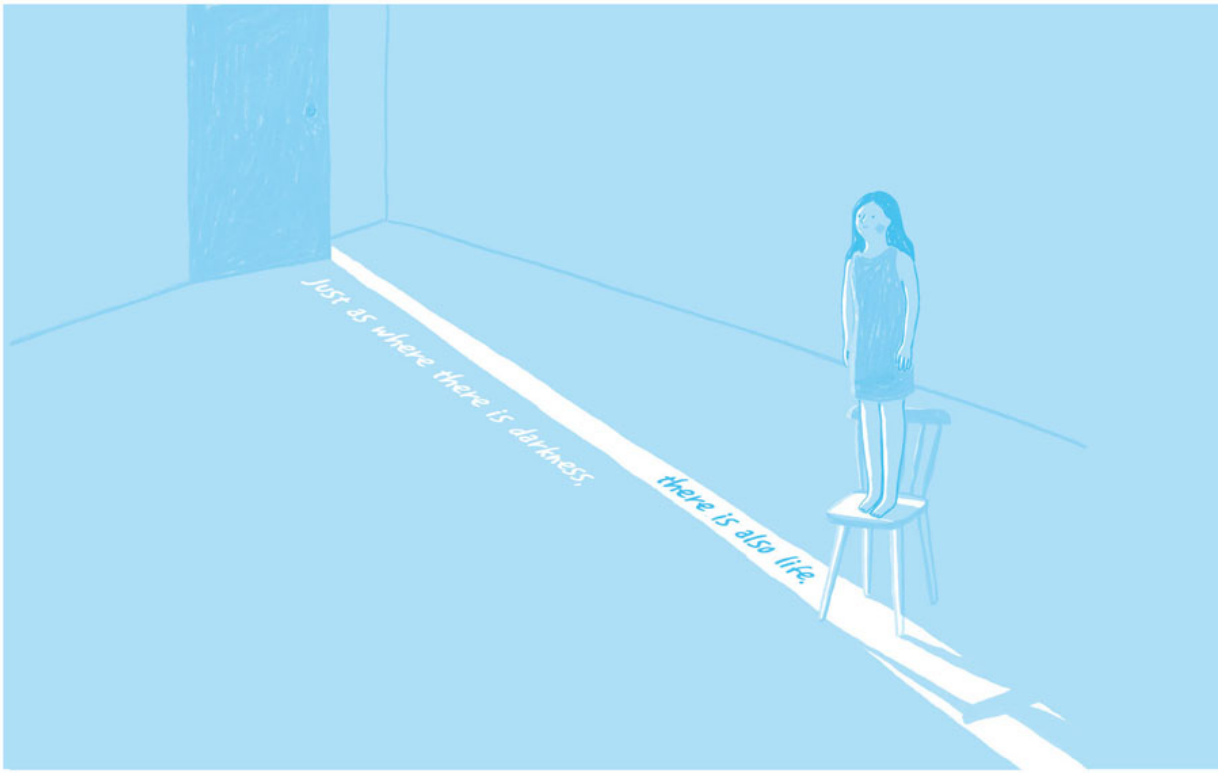
41
Sick and Tired of Life

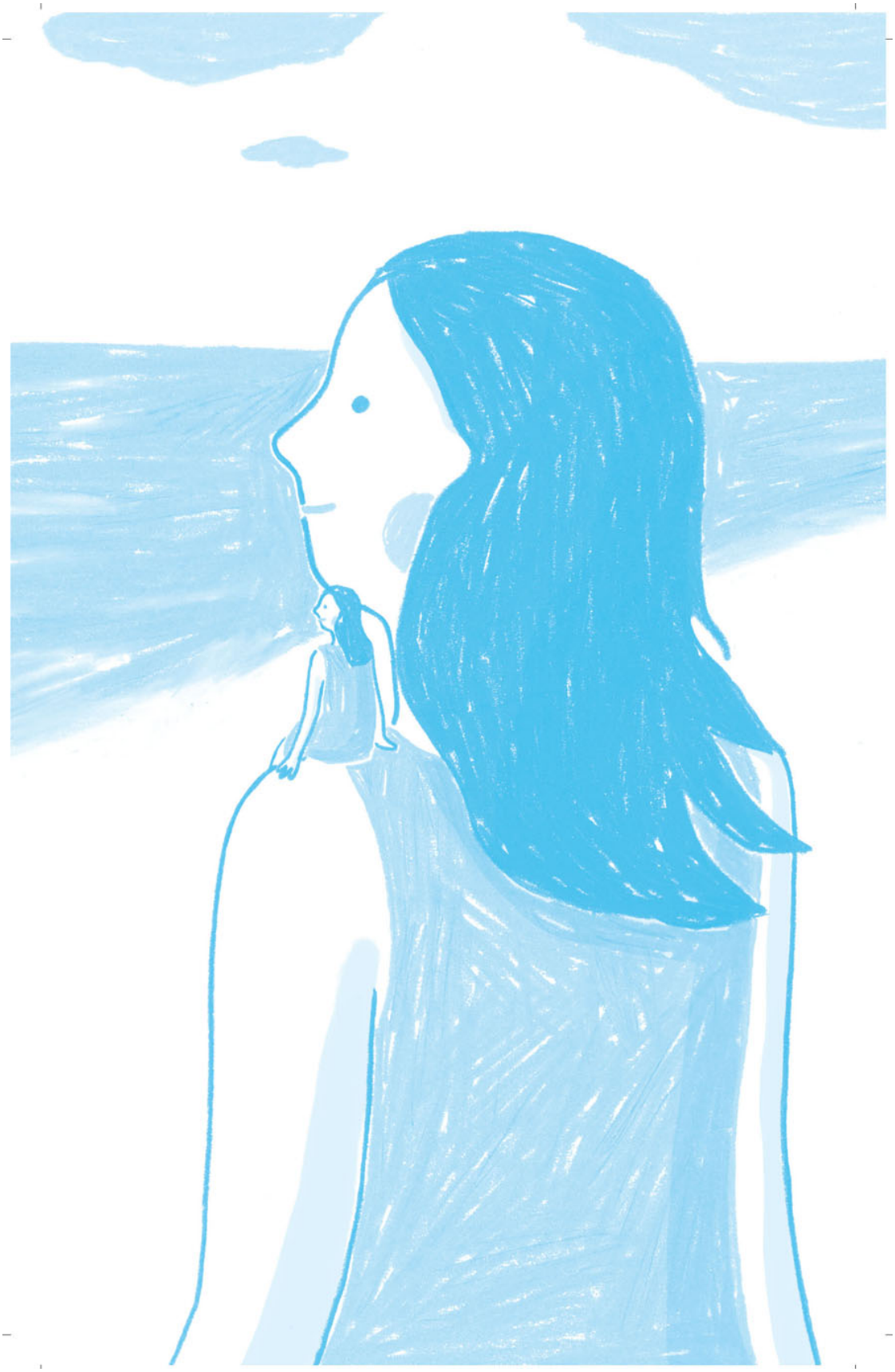


Where there are
small things

there are big things, too.

Maybe somewhere beyond
the boredom I feel now

I'll find a fierce
zeal for life.



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BOREDOM AS COUNTEREVIDENCE

Though I always used to say that I just wanted an easy life, whenever I actually achieved something and life got a little easier, I would fall into a rut. Was it because I'd become too goal-oriented, and lost sight of the process itself? Each time I accomplished a goal, one of my reasons for living disappeared along with it. Then, until I came up with a new goal, I would lose direction, and the happiness I felt would fizzle out.

I once heard that when humans face extreme circumstances or are on the verge of death, they are unable to feel boredom. Perhaps that's why boredom is regarded as a luxury for lazy people with too much time on their hands. But even when we're busy, boredom can worm its way in at a moment's notice. At times like these, hopeful narratives about how everything's going to be okay don't help in the slightest. Of course, some people might find them useful, but in my case, they provided nothing more than a temporary comfort to quell the emotions that'd floated up to the surface.

I therefore wondered whether something lay beyond the boredom. We don't notice a flashlight shining outside on a sunny day. Only when it's dark can we see it, and only those who've seen brightness know that darkness is dark. There's no such thing as absolute brightness or absolute darkness. And so, I believe there's no such thing as absolute boredom. If a person felt nothing but boredom, perhaps paradoxically this would make it more difficult for them to feel bored. If we're bored or feel sick and tired of life, this is in fact evidence that we've lived life with great passion, or that we have the desire to live life to the fullest.

What lies beyond our present thoughts and feelings are the original forms of our desires. The reason that whenever my life got a little easier, it would get that much more boring, was perhaps because of the longings deep within me, which couldn't be satisfied purely by comfort. When you, too, find what lies beyond boredom, I hope that you'll acknowledge and embrace it.

'There you are. I kept you waiting, didn't I?'

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42
I Know the Happy Moments Don’t Last

If there’s one thing I know about happiness

What did I go and do that for?

Let’s not waste today while we’re still stuck in yesterday yearning for tomorrow.

Be happy right now.

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WE NEED TO BE HAPPY RIGHT NOW

Rather than when I'd actually achieved something, I always felt more happiness (as well as pain) when I was figuring out *how* to achieve that thing. After all, these times were never tainted by boredom or despair. Worrying about how to achieve my goals made me feel alive. I would make assumptions about what might happen in the uncertain future, and without me realising, I also lived under constant stress. I knew that the happiness that followed an achievement wouldn't last long, and so to avoid the ensuing sense of hopelessness, I buried myself in my fears and concerns.

We tend to think of happiness as a fleeting emotion. Once the moment of happiness has passed, we return to our normal everyday lives, and because our threshold for feeling happiness increases each time, it becomes harder and harder to find it again[3]. If we remain in one of only two states – happiness or sadness – the spectrum of positive emotions we can feel narrows dramatically.

In life, once one problem is solved, a new stressful situation always presents itself. Nothing we achieve can ever guarantee complete and eternal happiness. However, if we find happiness in the moment, we receive the gift of the present. What we need to most beware of is a heart that wants for nothing.

Enjoying and cherishing the present is the same as cherishing our own selves. Let's not fear the happiness being over, but instead fill our present with anticipation.

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3 Choi In-cheol, *The Good Life*, 21st Century Books, 2018

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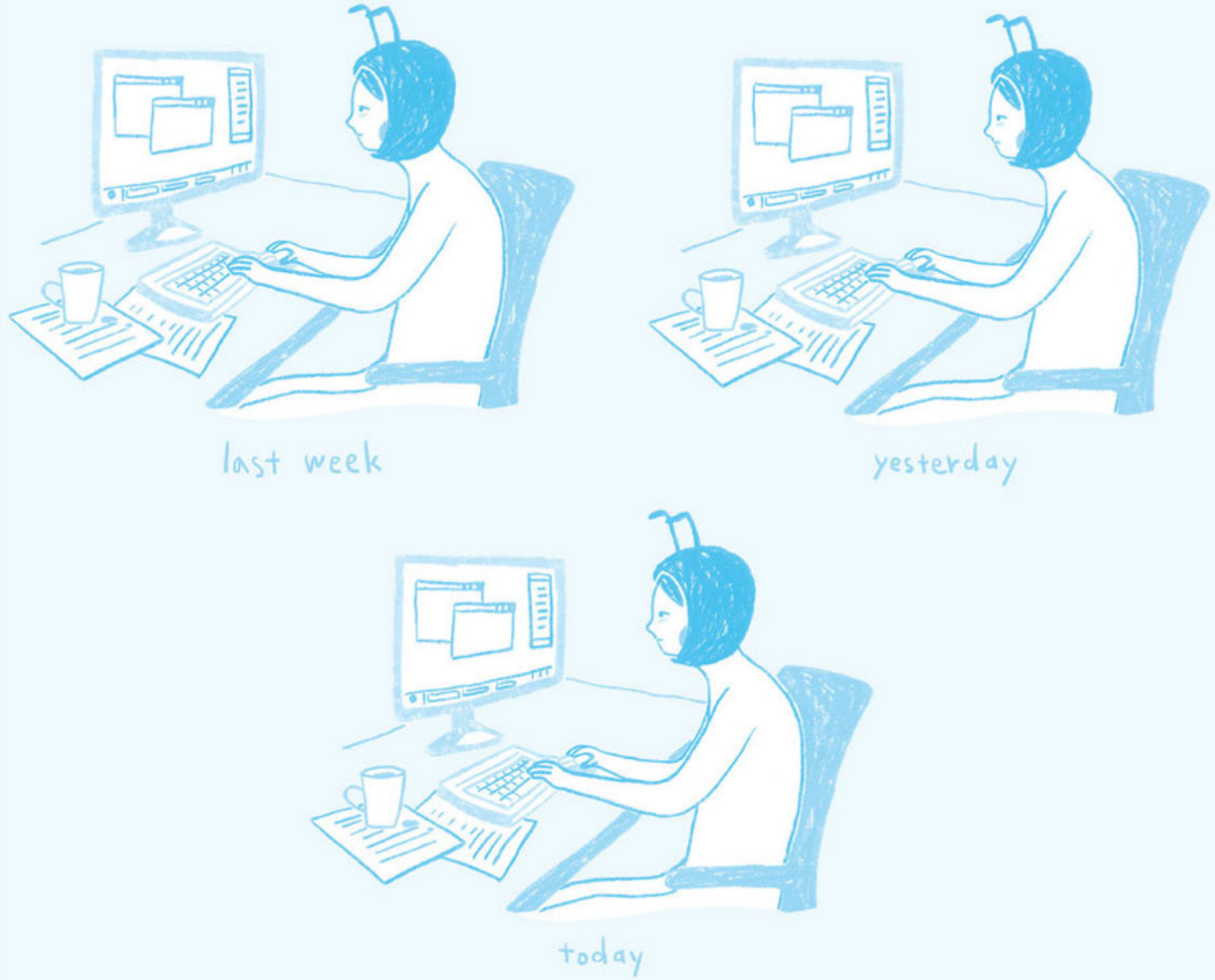
MY LITTLE TIPS FOR RECHARGING AN EMPTY HEART

The Fatter My Pockets Get, the Poorer My Heart Becomes

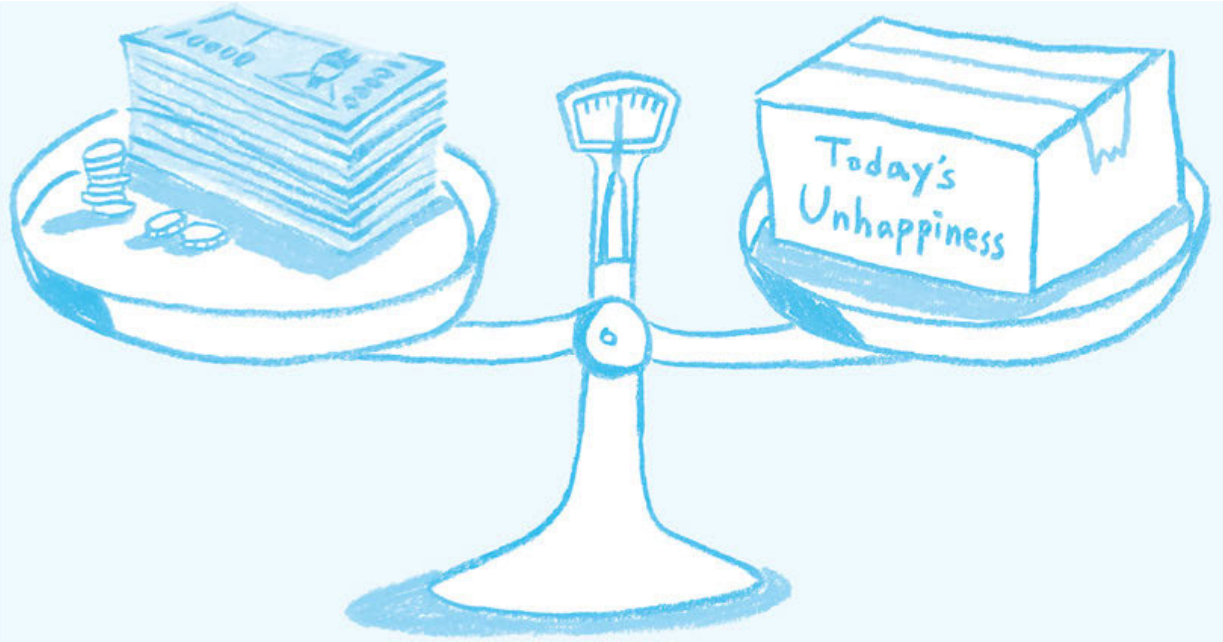
The more I earn, the more my happiness dwindles.

I’ll be working hard

and suddenly wonder, *Why am I not happier?*

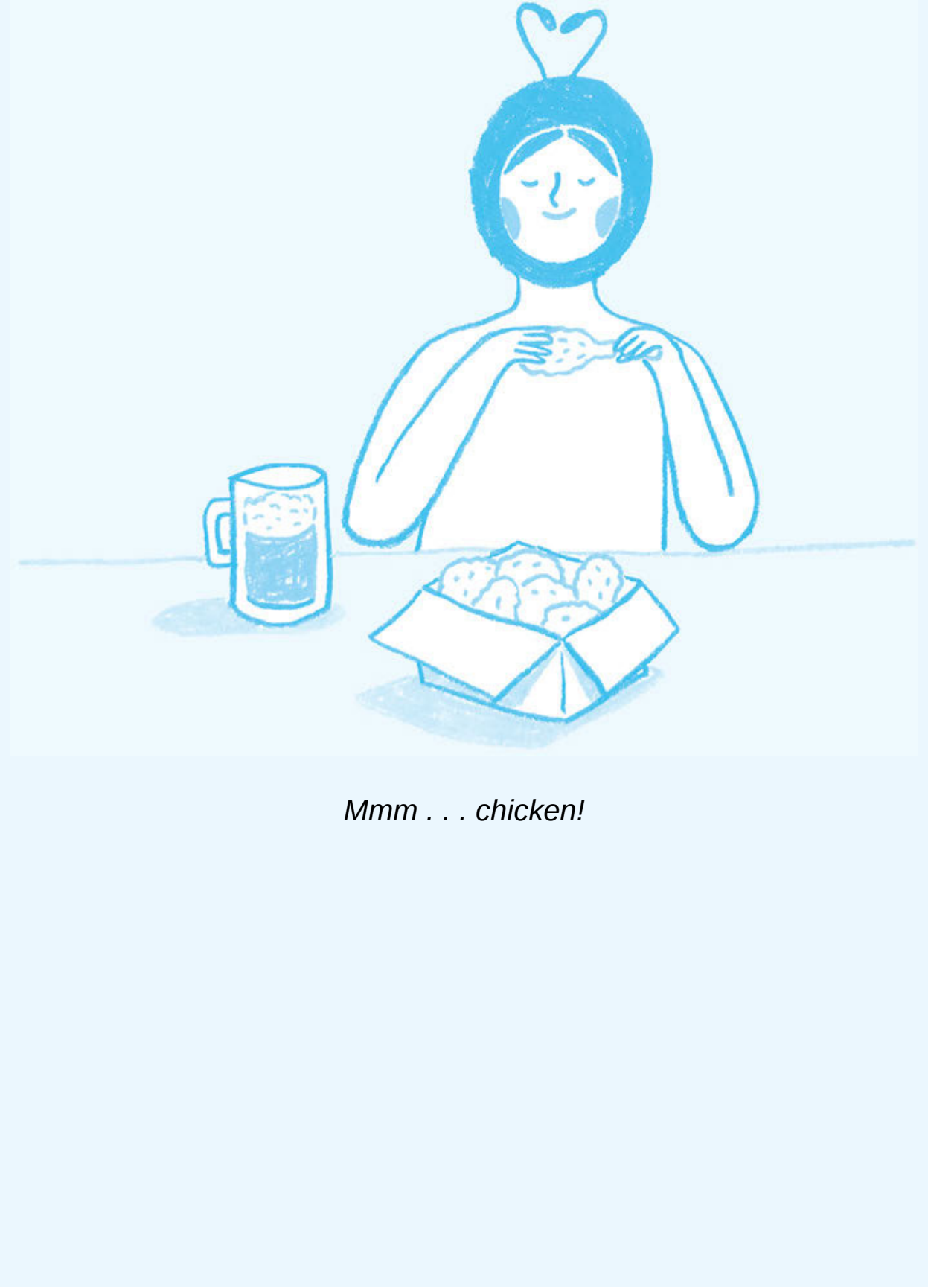


I’m doing more earning than spending.



The money I earnt today is the price of a ‘day’s unhappiness’.

I use that money to buy happiness again.



Mmm . . . chicken!

STORING UP HAPPINESS BIT BY BIT

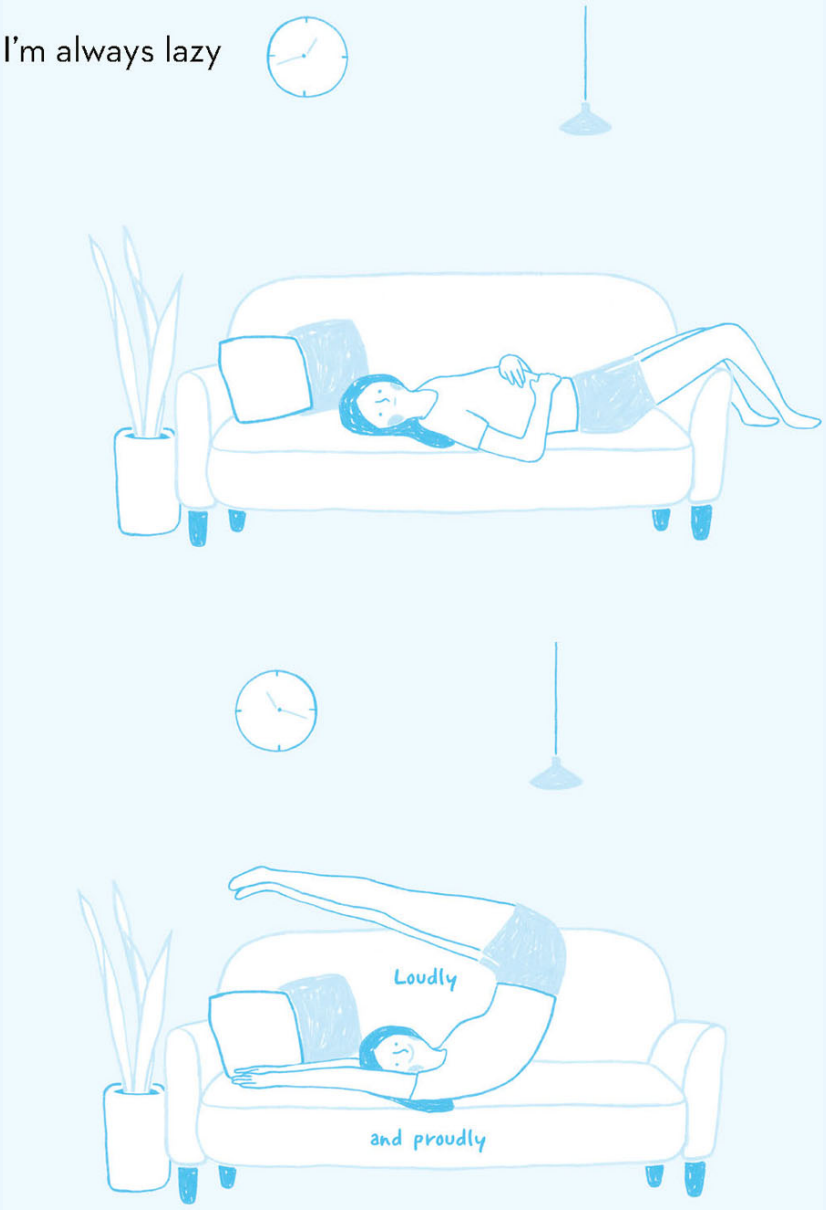
While we're racing towards a goal in the search for happiness, our day to day is generally anything but happy. Swept up by the waves of daily life, our hearts get worn down, and perhaps it gets too late to feel 'small but sure happiness'. So, whenever we experience happiness in the everyday, we need to make sure to store these memories nicely in our hearts. We don't need to chase great happiness to have a decent day.

RECHARGE THE SPIRIT!

Lying on the bed while I eat chips and watch TV dramas; on the weekend, spending an entire day lounging around and searching for patterns on the ceiling wallpaper; going to my favourite brunch place, where I listen to music and eat waffles with ice cream . . . Let's come up with our own little rituals to recharge our spirits.

MY LITTLE TIPS FOR RECHARGING AN EMPTY HEART

When I Put Myself Down for Wanting to Lounge Around All Day



but I like that I can feel less guilty about it on the weekend.

EMBRACE YOUR LAZINESS!

Our energy levels frequently change depending on the situation. When we max out our effort, sometimes our battery goes flat. And even if on some days we feel like a waste of space, we shouldn't be too hard on ourselves. When we rest, we need to do it guilt-free – only then can we be recharged for tomorrow.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH WASTING TIME!

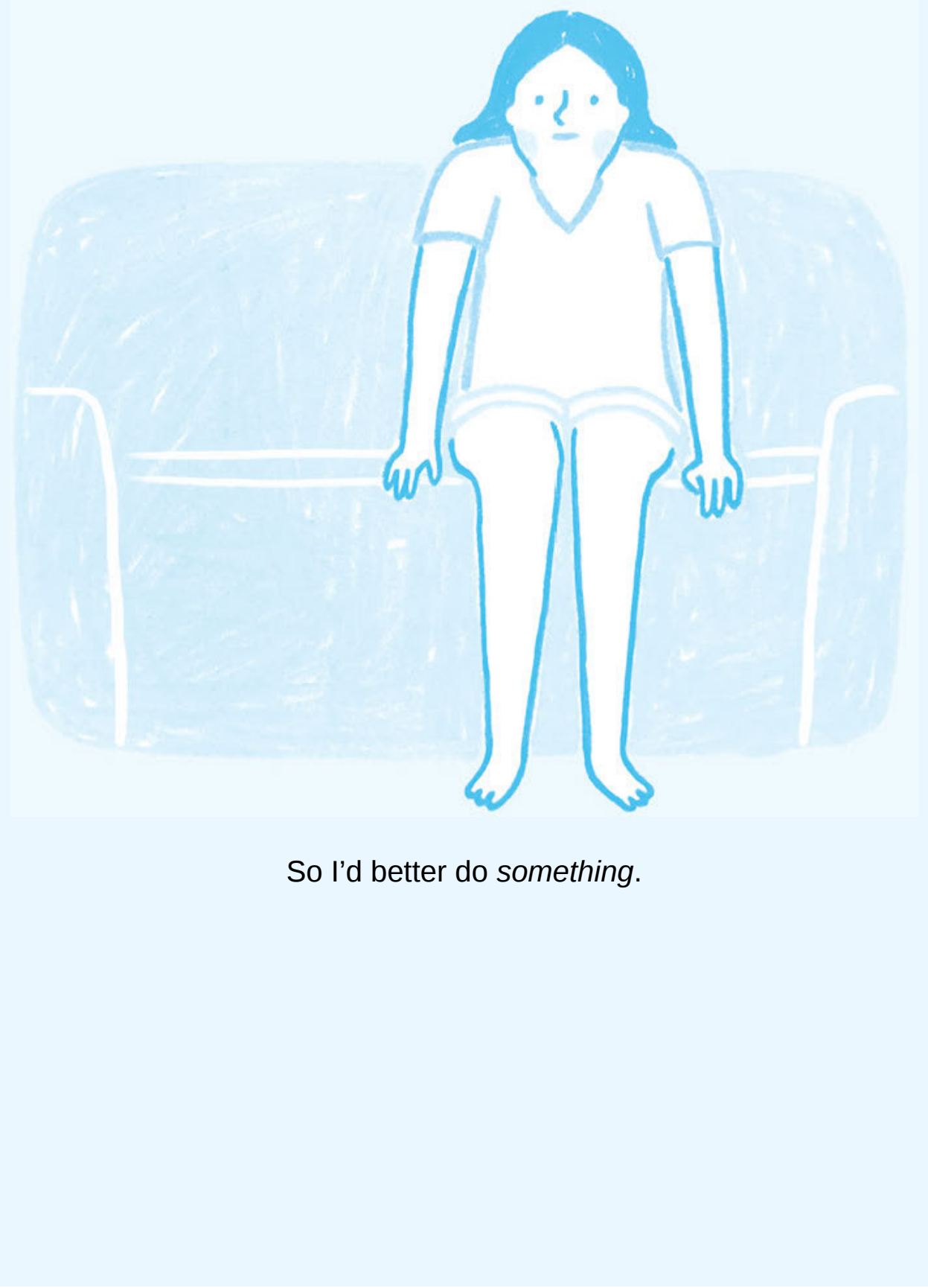
Some things are annoying to do, but the real problem is, in life there are *so many* annoying things to be done. Can we not just lie around in bed? Inside, we may cry out, *Lounging in bed should be considered a worthwhile activity!*, but on weekdays we feel guilty, and even if our bodies are still, our minds are busy. So at least for this weekend, how about being extravagant and wasting time for a day?

MY LITTLE TIPS FOR RECHARGING AN EMPTY HEART

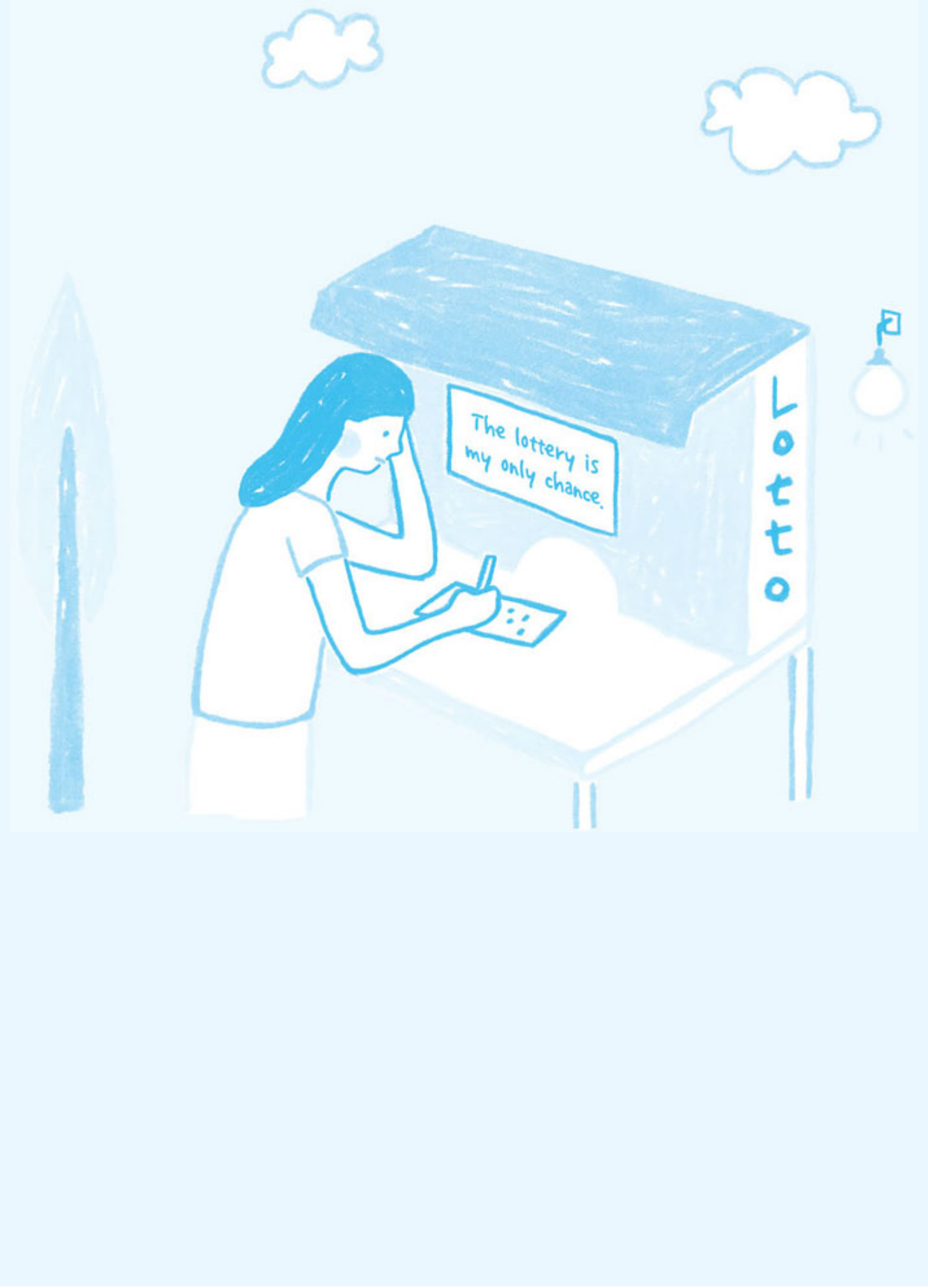
When I’m Doing Nothing, But My Mind Is Uneasy

When I do nothing,

nothing happens.



So I'd better do *something*.


The lottery is my only chance.
Lotto

TRY SOMETHING, WHATEVER IT IS

Just because we live in a society that overvalues labour, there's no need to force ourselves to fit that framework. Not wanting to work is extremely normal, after all. However, we mustn't spend too long *only* doing nothing. In doing so, we forget that we're free to shift into a different state at any time. If we find ourselves stuck in the same pattern day after day, we should do something to wake ourselves up. Even if you spend a whole day sleeping, try sleeping in different positions. Whatever it is, let's try doing something.

DON'T SHUT POSSIBILITIES DOWN

If we grow too accustomed to staying in one state, there's a high chance we'll stunt our personal growth. What's important, therefore, is to do something, no matter what it may be. This isn't about being productive: it's so that we don't deny ourselves the potential to change.

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AUTHOR BIO

Dancing Snail is an acclaimed illustrator and writer. She is the illustrator of the bestselling Korean edition of *I Want to Die but I Want to Eat Tteokbokki*. Having experienced depression, anxiety and burnout, she seeks to spread messages of compassion and patience to all those who feel burdened. She is based in South Korea.

TRANSLATOR BIO

Clare Richards is an award-winning translator of Korean literature. She has translated works by Kang Hwagil, Lim Solah, and Yeon Somin, amongst others. Clare is a mentor for the NCW Emerging Translators Mentorship programme and is a BCLT Summer School workshop leader. In her spare time, she's often found crocheting, reading, or gardening in her countryside cottage.

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